

PAINTERLY REPRESENTATION IN NEW YORK, 1945-1975

by

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Abstract

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Advisor: Professor Patricia Mainardi

Although the myth persists that figurative painting in New York did not exist after the age of Abstract Expressionism, many artists in fact worked with a painterly, representational vocabulary during this period and throughout the 1960s and 1970s. This dissertation is the first survey of a group of painters working in this mode, all born around the 1920s and living in New York. Several, though not all, were students of Hans Hofmann; most knew one another; some were close friends or colleagues as art teachers. I highlight nine artists: Rosemarie Beck (1923-2003), Leland Bell (1922-1991), Nell Blaine (1922-1996), Robert De Niro (1922-1993), Paul Georges (1923-2002), Albert Kresch (b. 1922), Mercedes Matter (1913-2001), Louisa Matthiasdottir (1917-2000), and Paul Resika (b. 1928).

This group of artists has been marginalized in standard art historical surveys and accounts of the period. In general, this is because figurative painting of this period does not fit into a teleological reading of art history, with abstraction perceived as the ultimate progression and goal of painting. As Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptualism gained force, the figurative painters were increasingly marginalized in the art world.

The aim of this dissertation is to re- contextualize these artists into the New York art world of their time by discussing their training as abstractionists, their aesthetic

theory, their teaching, their critical reception, and their careers. I focus particularly on the ways in which they reconciled the principles of abstraction with representational content. Although abstraction and representation were increasingly polarized in the art world, the painters themselves, and several critics and writers on their work were able to see the possibilities for a more dialectical synthesis of the two.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1975, an exhibition opened at Ingber Gallery entitled *Painterly Representation*. Curated by Louis Finkelstein (1923-2003), the painter, teacher, and writer, it was accompanied by an exhibition catalog with an essay he authored.¹ Patricia Mainardi assisted in organizing the exhibition, which traveled, in 1976-77, to ten additional venues – university galleries and museums throughout the country. Grouping sixteen painters, the exhibition presented a fairly unified aesthetic – representational painting (the figure, still life, and landscape) with a “painterly” approach.² The majority of the painters in the show were born around the 1920s and lived in New York. Several, though not all, were students of Hans Hofmann; most knew one another; some were close friends or colleagues as art teachers. Finkelstein, with this show and his essay, got as close as anyone did at defining this generation and aesthetic; no one had successfully given the group a name – to this day, they lack a name. This is the generation of painters I treat in this dissertation. Not every artist in Finkelstein’s show is highlighted here, but nine are: Rosemarie Beck (1923-2003), Leland Bell (1922-1991), Nell Blaine (1922-1996), Robert De Niro (1922-1993), Paul Georges (1923-2002), Mercedes Matter (1913-2001), Louisa Matthiasdottir (1917-2000), and Paul Resika (b. 1928). Additionally, Finkelstein himself (who included his own work in the exhibition) is treated in this dissertation as an “artist-critic.”

¹ Louis Finkelstein, *Painterly Representation*. Exh. cat. (New York: Ingber Gallery, 1975).

² I define the term “painterly” in this dissertation as painting in which brushstroke and facture are not concealed; rather they are important stylistic elements, and formal issues are prioritized over illusionistic representation.

This group of artists has been marginalized in standard art historical surveys and accounts of the period. In general, this is because figurative painting of this period does not fit into a teleological reading of art history, with abstraction perceived as the ultimate progression and goal of painting. In this reading, the decision to paint figuratively in New York in the 1950s, 1960s and beyond—after Abstract Expressionism—was problematic. Just as institutions grappled with the problem of “what is next,” Pop Art stepped in as a ready-made movement. It included imagery but rejected traditional modes of image-making, and was fully socio-politically grounded in its time. Conceptualism, Minimalism, and installation art also were acceptable progressions from abstraction.

The work of these painterly figurative artists forged a synthesis between representational subject matter and the principles of abstraction. This stemmed from their training with Hans Hofmann and their grounding in abstraction. Their careers were a constant quest to reconcile the two modes of working as well as to expand the possibilities for their artwork; they did not want to be limited by preconceived structures. They looked to an alternate pantheon of art historical role models which included Balthus, Héliou, and Derain. Abstract Expressionism is perceived as a new, purely American movement, which broke from the past. In contrast, the painterly figurative artists embraced the European past, particularly the French modernist tradition.

Their ideas were somewhat acceptable in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s when the art world was smaller but more embracing of varied possibilities. As the New York art world became larger with more galleries, artists, and critics, it became vital that emerging movements had a “brand name.” Increasingly, abstraction and representation

were polarized, abstraction was perceived as solely concerned with formal issues, and representation viewed in literary terms. By the mid-1960s the major institutions, like the Museum of Modern Art, presented exhibitions of a “new figuration” as a literary / existentialist movement – images where the figure was distorted, exaggerated, where narrative or human agony was prioritized. It was a vision quite different from the work of the painters I discuss, who looked mostly to French sources rather than Expressionist ones, who did not attempt to distort or exaggerate nature but instead looked to it as inspiration and an armature for the picture plane, spatial organization, and a rhythmic arrangement of forms.

Neither did certain critics—notably Thomas Hess, the editor of *Art News*, and Fairfield Porter, a figurative painter who wrote for *The Nation* and *Art News*—polarize representation and figuration. It was as the art world changed, in the mid-1960s that the painters became marginalized – meaning that many major critics did not write about them, they were excluded from major museum exhibitions, and from major art galleries. However, even today, a myth persists that representational painting disappeared entirely, and later reappeared. In fact, these artists were active and working throughout the heyday of Abstract Expressionism and beyond. They had viable, real careers, and were exhibited and written about in the major art magazines and newspapers. This dissertation revisits their careers and place in the art world.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1, “The Lessons of Hans Hofmann,” discusses the influence of Hofmann’s teaching and theories on Blaine, De Niro, Georges, Albert Kresch (b. 1922),

Matter, Matthiasdottir, and Resika. (I do not discuss every artist in every chapter; instead I address those whose histories or ideas are most relevant to the theme and argument presented therein.) I use Hofmann's major, but unpublished, treatise on art, *The Painter's Primer*, for a detailed examination of his ideas and the lasting impact they had on these painters.³ This chapter articulates the possibilities for applying Hofmann's principles to either abstract or figurative art. Hofmann was a dialectical thinker who reveled in the synthesis of flatness and depth, two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality, as opposed to the more rigid interpretation Clement Greenberg proffered. Greenberg suggested that upholding the *flatness* of the canvas was the ultimate goal of painting.

Chapter 2, "Reconciling Abstraction and Figuration," discusses how and why these painters, who were trained in abstraction and were poised to "inherit" the New York School, reintroduced figurative elements into their painting. As the artists reintroduced figuration into their canvas, their main concern was how to reconcile representational elements with formal concerns. I treat the Jane Street Gallery - the earliest-known artists' cooperative in New York, which included Bell, Blaine, Kresch, and Matthiasdottir. In the mid-1940s, it was a forum for geometric abstraction, but by the time it closed in 1949, the artist-members had begun to paint figuratively. In contrast to the Jane Street Group, I discuss the stylistic shifts of Matter, Resika, and Beck.

Chapter 3, "From Insiders to Outsiders," looks at painterly figuration through the perspective of critics (Thomas Hess, Lawrence Campbell, and Hilton Kramer) and institutions, such as the Museum of Modern Art, which organized exhibitions of

³ Hans Hofmann, *The Painter's Primer: Form and Color in the Creative Process (IIIrd German Version)*, trans. Georgina Huck, 97-page typescript, Archives of American Art, New York and Washington, D.C.

figurative painting in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Chapter 3 traces a progression in critical theory through the late 1950s to the mid-1960s. Hess considered these painters art-world insiders, and inheritors of the New York School. In contrast, several museum exhibitions of the period presented figurative painting through a literary / philosophical lens, and as such, distinct from the concerns of abstract painting. In addition, the abstraction/figuration divide assumed greater implications when linked to politics. Abstraction was linked with progressive politics, a perspective which has been most overtly assumed in Benjamin Buchloh's 1981 article, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression."⁴ The artists discussed herein have been continually dismissed as "conservative," not only in their aesthetic modes, but also in their personal politics. The fact that one of the important critical apologists for their work, Hilton Kramer, is also perceived as a conservative, has contributed to this assumption.

Chapter 4, "The Artist's Voice," turns back to the artist as theorist of his/her own work. I address the writing, teaching and public lectures of Matter, Beck, De Niro, and Bell, as well as that of the philosophical "artist-critics" Finkelstein and Porter. In Chapter 4, with the development of the artists' own theory, we see other possibilities for bridging the abstraction/representation divide. Matter valued the process of art-making and an abstract approach to composition over the final product or the represented form. Porter rejected "manifesto criticism," which judged work solely according to the critic's prior ideas or defined categories like representation or figuration. Bell developed a unique and polemical pantheon of artistic heroes – both abstract and representational. He also

⁴ Benjamin Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *October* 16 (1981): 39-68.

insisted on form as primary and subject as irrelevant – a somewhat problematic strategy for linking his work to abstraction, since it denied a major component of his work.

Chapter 5, “Career Arcs,” addresses the general scope of the careers of De Niro, Blaine, Matthiasdottir, and Resika, in tandem with their stylistic evolution. I show how their distinct career choices and world-views were related to their individual aesthetics. I treat several of their dealers—Elinor Poindexter, Virginia Zabriskie, Robert Schoelkopf, and Louis Pollack—who worked with the figurative painters despite their increasing marginalization. These dealers were able to see beyond the abstraction/figuration divide, and presented these painters along with abstract artists. I also address the Alliance of Figurative Artists – a weekly gathering place and community which hosted lectures and panel discussions in the 1970s.

Review of the Literature

A survey of these painterly figurative artists has never been written. Jed Perl’s *New Art City* treats several of these artists, but within a larger scope of intellectual history.⁵ He also addresses abstract and conceptual artists as he describes the philosophical underpinnings of the New York art world of the 1950s. Perl places the figurative artists within the various tendencies he discusses: De Niro (along with Earl Kerkam and Jackson Pollock) exemplified a Romantic spirit; Blaine’s work reflected a “pastoral” strain of the New York School; Bell’s endeavor was fed by the existentialism that also informed his hero, Giacometti; and Matthiasdottir’s work displayed an empiricism that Perl considers shared by Donald Judd and Fairfield Porter. Matter – and

⁵ Jed Perl, *New Art City* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

founding of the New York Studio School - is featured in Perl's chapter "Teachers," along with Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg.

When the artists were mid-career, their work was treated in exhibition catalogue essays and reviews as opposed to monographs. Through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the major critics and writers on this painting included Thomas Hess, Lawrence Campbell, Fairfield Porter, Martica Sawin, Sidney Tillim, Louis Finkelstein, Hilton Kramer, and the poet-art critics: John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler. Their essays and reviews form a "first wave" of response to this painting.

A "second wave" of writing gradually began to encompass some monographs. Perl became an influential voice on these artists in his columns for *Vogue*, the *New Criterion*, and the *New Republic*. (These columns have been anthologized in two volumes.)⁶ In 1985, Perl and Deborah Rosenthal authored *Louisa Matthiasdottir, Small Paintings*, which included an essay by Nicholas Fox Weber.⁷ The next year, Weber, who since became the director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation and authored books on Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus, published a monograph on Bell.⁸ It is a useful resource, but a quirky one – an enthusiastic, personal appreciation of the artist, informed—and organized by—Weber's conversations and studio visits with Bell.

More recently, a "third wave" of publications reflects a new or revived interest in the painters, with several major, illustrated monographs. Sawin, the former chair of the art history department at the Parsons School of Design, and a scholar of Surrealism, has remained an important and widely-published authority on these painters. Sawin wrote

⁶ Jed Perl, *Gallery Going: Four Seasons in the Art World*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, Publishers, 1991); Jed Perl, *Eyewitness* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

⁷ Jed Perl and Deborah Rosenthal, with an essay by Nicholas Fox Weber, *Louisa Matthiasdottir: Small Paintings* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1986).

⁸ Nicholas Fox Weber, *Leland Bell* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1986).

the text for a proposed monograph on De Niro, unfortunately not yet published.⁹

Although it is unpublished, Sawin has graciously shared her manuscript with me, and it has been an indispensable resource, based on in-depth interviews with De Niro's ex-wife Virginia Admiral and other friends, De Niro's papers, and close evaluation of his work. In 1998, Sawin authored *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life*.¹⁰ This is a comprehensive text which incorporates a biographical treatment with an analysis of Blaine's stylistic development. An essay by Sawin is also part of a 2001 exhibition catalogue on Bell organized by the List Gallery of Swarthmore College.¹¹

In 1999, two years before Matthiasdottir's death, a major book about her life and work was published (first in an Icelandic edition), edited by Jed Perl, and including texts by John Ashbery, Sawin, Perl, and Adalsteinn Ingolfsson.¹² In 2004, a heavily illustrated monograph on De Niro was published by Salander O'Reilly Galleries, with a text by Peter Frank.¹³ Most recently, in 2009, a traveling retrospective of Mercedes Matter's work occasioned the publication of a major book.¹⁴ Ellen Landau, who wrote the central text for it, had previously written about the intersection of Matter, her husband Herbert, and Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner in the exhibition catalogue *Pollock Matters*.¹⁵ In the later text, Landau expanded her treatment of Matter's extraordinary social/artistic milieu and its relevance to her work. Additionally, Barbara Wolanin's more focused

⁹ Martica Sawin, "Robert De Niro: His Art and Life," 1994. Photocopy of 114-page typescript, copy in author's files, courtesy of Martica Sawin, New York.

¹⁰ Martica Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998).

¹¹ Andrea Packard, Andrea. *Changing Rhythms: Works by Leland Bell, 1950s-1991*. Exh. cat. (Swarthmore, PA: List Gallery, Swarthmore College, 2001).

¹² Jed Perl, ed. *Louisa Matthiasdottir*. (Reykjavik: Nesútgáfan Publishing, 1999).

¹³ Peter Frank, *Robert De Niro, Sr.* (New York: Salander O'Reilly Galleries, 2004).

¹⁴ Ellen Landau, Sandra Kraskin, Phyllis Braff, and Michael Zakian. *Mercedes Matter*. (New York: Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College, 2009).

¹⁵ Ellen Landau and Claude Cernuschi, eds. *Pollock Matters*. Exh. cat. (Boston: McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College, 2007).

essay, published in a 2004 Hollis Taggart Gallery exhibition catalogue, treated the intersection of Matter, her father Arthur B. Carles, and Hofmann, in Gloucester in 1934, and is exceptionally thoughtful and well-researched.¹⁶ Previously, almost no literature on Matter was available. The recent wave of publications on this group of painters also includes a volume of collected writings by Louis Finkelstein.¹⁷

Two Ph.D. dissertations have focused on artists of this group. A 1978 dissertation by Ruth Bass was centered on the issues and problems of designating Bell, Blaine, Georges, Matthiasdottir, and Resika as realists.¹⁸ In 1993, Stanley Grand completed a dissertation on Georges: “Allegories of Freedom in the Paintings of Paul Georges,” which discussed the paintings in terms of Georges’s quest for complete artistic / personal freedom.¹⁹ Grand also catalogued all of Georges’s paintings as part of his project. In 1995, Grand curated an exhibition of Georges’s self-portraits and authored the catalogue essay.²⁰

Monographs have not been published on Georges, Resika, Beck, or Kresch. Resika’s work has been extensively reviewed, however, and many exhibition catalogues of his work published. Avis Berman, who conducted a major interview in four parts with Resika for the National Academy of Design, has recently been compiling a comprehensive chronology on his life and work, and has generously shared this work-in-

¹⁶ Avis Berman, ed. *From Hawthorne to Hofmann: Provincetown Vignettes 1899-1945*, with essays by Richard Boyle, Tina Dickey, Michael Taylor, and Barbara Wolanin. Exh. cat. (New York: Hollis Taggart Galleries, 2004).

¹⁷ Mindy Aloff, ed., *The Unpicturelikeness of Pollock, Soutine and Others: Selected Writings and Talks by Louis Finkelstein* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2008).

¹⁸ Ruth Bass, “Five Realist Painters and the Concept of Contemporary American Realist Painting: An Aesthetic Study of Works by Leland Bell, Nell Blaine, Paul Georges, Louisa Matthiasdottir, and Paul Resika.” Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1978.

¹⁹ Stanley Grand, “Allegories of Freedom in the Paintings of Paul Georges” (Ph.D. diss., Madison: The University of Washington, 1993).

²⁰ Stanley Grand, *Paul Georges: Self Portraits*. Exh. cat. (Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania: Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes University, 1995).

progress with me.²¹ The literature on Beck is more scant. A retrospective exhibition of Beck at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio in 2002 was accompanied by another informative catalogue essay by Sawin.²² Very little has been published on Kresch.

I have published previously on these artists, including a 2003 exhibition catalogue essay on the Jane Street Group, and a 2005 essay on the pedagogy of the New York Studio School, and Mercedes Matter, for an exhibition brochure.²³

This dissertation focuses on the artists' own artistic / aesthetic ideology, developed throughout their careers and manifested in their work, teaching, and writing. I discuss the roots of these ideas of in Hofmann's teaching, and the theory of Mondrian and Jean Hélion, and contrast it to the institutional theory and criticism in response to their work. These issues, especially, have been largely neglected in the current scholarship, which has tended more toward biographical treatments and analyses of stylistic development.

The dissertation is not a comprehensive survey of all of the representational painting in the period. It represents a subgroup of painters, who shared a "painterly" figurative approach rooted in Abstract Expressionism and Hofmann's dictums. Because I focus almost exclusively on Hofmann students, I did not discuss other painters like Lois Dodd or Alex Katz who came from Cooper Union and thus represent a distinct tendency. Neither do I discuss Lennart Anderson, who studied at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in

²¹ Avis Berman, "Paul Resika: A Narrative Chronology," Copy of 66- page typescript, in author's files, courtesy of Avis Berman and Blair Resika, 2010 (in progress); Paul Resika, interview by Avis Berman, 30 May 2004, 31 May 2004, 6 December 2004, 13 December 2004, transcript of four tape recordings. The National Academy of Design Oral History Project, New York.

²² Martica Sawin, "Rosemarie Beck: Never Form But Forming," in *Rosemarie Beck: Paintings 1965-2001*. Exh. cat. (Dayton, Ohio: University Galleries, Wright State University, 2002).

²³ Jennifer Samet, *The Jane Street Gallery: Celebrating New York's First Artist Cooperative*, with an introduction by Irving Sandler. Exh. cat. (New York: Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 2003); Jennifer Samet, "Mapping the Pedagogy of the New York Studio School," in *The Continuous Mark: 40 Years of the New York Studio School*. Exh. brochure. (New York: New York Studio School, 2005).

Michigan, although he is an important figure in this movement. The exceptions to the students of Hofmann category are Beck and Bell. Beck was mentored by Philip Guston, Robert Motherwell, and Bradley Walker Tomlin, but her story so well illustrates represents the reconciliation of abstraction and representation, her aesthetic is so in line with the others, and her friendships and relationships so connected that it needed to be told here. The same is true for Bell, who was mentored by Karl Knaths, but became quite aware of Hofmann's teachings because he met his wife Louisa Matthiasdottir in this period. I veer away from the more "expressionist" treatments of the figure like the work of Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, and Lester Johnson. Neither do I discuss the tighter, more realist painters like Gabriel Laderman, Philip Pearlstein, and Alfred Leslie. Since I have chosen to tell the story of a shift from abstraction to representation, I did not treat artists who never really painted abstractly, like Jane Freilicher or Larry Rivers. All of the artists I discuss were born in or around the 1920s, so they are fairly cohesive generation. Thus I do not treat Fairfield Porter as a painter, only as a critic, since he was born in 1907 and thus represents a distinct generation.

Although this dissertation touches on a wide segment of history, much more work could be done on the subject and several different artists could be addressed. For example, in this period, a painters-and-poets circle converged, which included several painterly figurative artists. Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, Alex Katz, John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Fairfield Porter (who is treated here only as an "artist-critic"), James Schuyler, and Nell Blaine (who *is* featured here) were part of this milieu. The art criticism and writing of Schuyler, O'Hara, and Ashbery on the figurative painters is poignant and well-informed. Ashbery's writing on Matthiasdottir, and Schuyler's writing

on Georges is particularly important. However, I considered this group to be outside of the scope of this project - another history which deserved a larger treatment.²⁴

Although the group failed to be labeled with their own name, they were an unofficial community with various connections, professional relationships, close friendships – and sometimes, long-lasting aesthetic debates, too, binding them. By 1975, the year of *Painterly Representation*, they all knew one another, and many were regularly gathering at the Friday evening Alliance of Figurative Artists meetings on the Lower East Side. This dissertation takes us up to this period, from the painters' educational origins, through their early stylistic shifts, to the development of their own theory and mature style.

²⁴ Russell Ferguson, *In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art*. Exh. cat. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), the catalogue which accompanied an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, treated Frank O'Hara's involvement with the New York art world.

CHAPTER ONE: THE LESSONS OF HANS HOFMANN

Hans Hofmann (1880-1966), the painter and teacher, is at the center of this story. Considered the most influential American teacher of art in the 20th Century, he taught seven of the artists to be discussed in this dissertation: Nell Blaine, Robert De Niro, Paul Georges, Albert Kresch, Mercedes Matter, Louisa Matthiasdottir, and Paul Resika. Although his importance is recognized by almost anyone writing about these painters, his ideology, theory, and teaching methods have not been analyzed in detail as to how they specifically influenced and informed his students' work. My goal in this chapter is to review the literature on Hofmann, and to elaborate on Hofmann's ideology, with close textual analysis of his writing and accounts of his teaching, showing how it informed and shaped his students through both their own accounts and visual analysis of their work. Although for the most part, the artists discussed here made abstract work during their time with Hofmann, his ideas are also at the core of their mature, representational painting. This chapter will also discuss the roots of Hofmann's ideology, which lie in both the writings of Cézanne and in Cubism, as well as in the writings of German modernist theorists such as Adolf Hildebrand, Wassily Kandinsky, and Wilhelm Worringer.

Hofmann, who is often referred to as the "Father of Abstract Expressionism," was born in Wiessenburg, Germany. His family moved to Munich when he was six years old. He studied at Moritz Heymann's Munich art school, with various teachers, including Willi Schwarz, who introduced him to Impressionism. Hofmann spent the decade

between 1904-14 in Paris, attending classes at the Ecole de la Grande Chaumière. In 1914, he returned to Munich, and, in 1915, opened his own art school there. Hofmann's Munich art school attracted several foreign students, including Louise Nevelson, Vaclav Vytlacil, Carl Holty, and Alfred Jensen. One of these students, Worth Ryder, became chairman of the art department at the University of California, Berkeley, and invited Hofmann to teach in the 1930 summer session. Hofmann spent the rest of his life in America, opening his art school in New York in 1932, and a summer school in Provincetown, Massachusetts in 1935.

Hofmann's teaching and public lectures were instrumental in shaping the ideology of New York School painting. Clement Greenberg attended a series of Hofmann's lectures and wrote:

Hans Hofmann is in all probability the most important art teacher of our time. Not only has his school sent out good painters; the insights into modern art of the man himself have gone deeper than those of any other contemporary. He has, at least in my opinion, grasped the issues at stake better than did Roger Fry and better than Mondrian, Kandinsky, Lhote, Ozenfant, and all the others who have tried to "explicate" the recent revolution in painting. Hofmann has not yet published his views, but they have already directly and indirectly influenced many, including this writer - who owes more to the initial illumination received from Hofmann's lectures than to any other source.¹

Greenberg's extraordinary acknowledgement of his debt to Hofmann seems alone reason enough to warrant closer reading of exactly what Hofmann taught, and from where his theories emerged.

Hofmann was a prolific writer on art. However, no complete anthology of his writings exists. Some were published during his lifetime; several are reprinted in Sam

¹ Clement Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation*, 21 April 1945, 469.

Hunter's monograph on the artist.² On the occasion of an exhibition at the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Massachusetts, a small volume entitled *Search for the Real*, was published, which includes three of Hofmann's essays, along with excerpts adapted from two additional essays.³ However, his major treatise, *The Painter's Primer: Form and Color in the Creative Process*,⁴ which he composed in German and revised over a period of forty years, and which was translated into English at different stages, has never been published, and exists only as a typescript translation.⁵ This text, which arguably represents Hofmann's most complete position on the nature of art and the practice of art-making, will inform the organization of this chapter. I will use its structure to explicate Hofmann's ideas, the roots of these ideas, and their influence on his students.

Review of the Literature on Hofmann's Theory and Teaching

Although the literature on Hofmann is extensive, and Hofmann's importance as a teacher is universally acknowledged, very little work has been done to explicitly analyze the technical substance of his teaching and theory, and its influence on his students.

Harold Rosenberg's 1962 article in *Portfolio & Art News Annual*, "Hans Hofmann's 'Life' Class," uses some of Hofmann's key phrases to animate his discussion of the

² Sam Hunter, *Hans Hofmann* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1963).

³ Bartlett Hayes and Sara T. Weeks, eds., *The Search for the Real and Other Essays* (exh. cat., Andover, Mass: Addison Gallery of American Art, 1948; reprint, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983). Includes "The Search for the Real in the Visual Arts," 46-54; "Sculpture," 55-59; "Painting and Culture," 60-64; excerpts from the teachings of Hans Hofmann adapted from his essays "On the Aims of Art" and "Plastic Creation," 65-76, 76-78 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

⁴ The title of this manuscript has been revised and translated in different ways. It was translated by Glenn Wessels in 1931 as "Creation in Form and Color: A Textbook for Instruction in Art."

⁵ I have used the 1948 translation by Georgina M. Huck, Ph.D, *The Painter's Primer: Form and Color in the Creative Process (Third German Version)*, 97-page typescript, Archives of American Art, New York and Washington, D.C.

school and characterize it in philosophical terms. He concludes that Hofmann was an individualist who deliberately sequestered the realm of art from time and social ills, but writes that, “in that decade of ideologies – New Deal, Marxist, Fascist, it was plain that the Hofmann teachings, too, offered a KEY.”⁶ Although Rosenberg does not explicate Hofmann in technical terms, he illustrates his essay with a photograph of a still-life set-up and three states of a Hofmann painting based on this set up. He also includes illustrations of works by 17 of Hofmann’s former students. More recently, Jed Perl’s 2005 book, *New Art City*, seems to pick up where Rosenberg left off, positioning Hofmann (the introductory character of his encyclopedic history) in terms of a New York City of rising ideas and cultural activity, and considering him to hold “a unique, almost talismanic position in that very complicated world.”⁷ Perl uses broad characterizations to paint a vivid picture of Hofmann, as opposed to detailing the finer points of his lessons.

A more straightforward account of the essence of Hofmann’s teaching can be found in Cynthia Goodman’s two-page essay in the brochure accompanying a 1979 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: *Hans Hofmann as Teacher: Drawings by His Students*.⁸ Her essay briefly outlines some major ideas in Hofmann’s teaching. Goodman published a related, more expansive article in *Arts Magazine* in April 1979, “Hans Hofmann as a Teacher,” which includes biographical background, outlines the progression of Hofmann’s schools, and explicates some pictorial lessons and terms such as rhythm, push-and pull, depth expressed through a succession of planes, and the equal

⁶ Harold Rosenberg, “Hofmann’s Life Class,” *Portfolio and Art News Annual 6* (Autum 1962), 20.

⁷ Jed Perl, *New Art City* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 7.

⁸ Cynthia Goodman, *Hans Hofmann as Teacher: Drawings by His Students* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979).

importance of positive and negative space in a composition.⁹ Goodman's extensive work on Hofmann also includes two monographs, published in 1986 and 1990, in which she intersects authoritative discussions of Hofmann's theory and teaching with his biography and painting.¹⁰

Some more specific discussion of Hofmann's technical / theoretical approach can be found in a 1974 *American Artist Magazine* article by Diane Cochrane, "The Teachings of Hans Hofmann: Push and Pull."¹¹ Cochrane discusses the influence of Hofmann on a group of artists who would become figurative – including Paul Georges, Paul Resika, and Nell Blaine, as well as Wolf Kahn, Jane Freilicher, and Ann Tabachnick. Cochrane uses quotes from the artists, examples of their work, and diagrams to illustrate the ideas, which she considers to revolve around the tenet of "push-pull." However, she does not address Hofmann's own texts in her article.

Two 1963 publications disseminated Hofmann's work and his writing: Sam Hunter's monograph on the artist, and the exhibition catalogue published by the Museum of Modern Art circulated by William Seitz, which includes a detailed discussion of "Hofmann's philosophy of painting."¹² Seitz uses extensive quotes from Hofmann's own writing, combining it with his own analysis to structure a sort of treatise divided into sections like "creation" and "pictorial elements." Although this is one of the earliest and most comprehensive discussions of Hofmann's theory, there is an unfortunate blurring between Seitz's analysis and Hofmann's own words.

⁹ Cynthia Goodman, "Hans Hofmann as a Teacher," *Arts Magazine* 53 (April 1979), 22-28.

¹⁰ Cynthia Goodman, *Hans Hofmann* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986); Cynthia Goodman, *Hans Hofmann* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1990).

¹¹ Diane Cochrane, "The Teachings of Hans Hofmann: Push and Pull," *American Artist* 38 (March 1974), 26-35, 63-65.

¹² Sam Hunter, *Hans Hofmann* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1963); William C. Seitz, *Hans Hofmann* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1963).

Sam Hunter's text aims to position Hofmann culturally and artistically through biographical and formal analysis, and includes a thoughtful, general discussion of Hofmann's writings. He—unlike many scholars—mentions the *Painter's Primer*, and characterizes the texts in descriptions like the following: "A reverence for creativity as an untamed romantic force played against the taste for objective, scientific methods of pictorial construction."¹³

Emily Farnham's *Abstraction as Plastic Expression and Notes Made in Hofmann's Classes* combines an alternately personal and extremely general introduction to Hofmann's and Farnham's own theories on modernism, with the author's notes from her time in class with Hofmann, and responses to a questionnaire by seven other former students.¹⁴ Although the Hofmann quotations are interesting, the format of this book and its perspective make it of limited usefulness.

A film produced by Madeleine Amgott, *Hans Hofmann Artist/Teacher, Teacher/Artist*, premiered on PBS in 2003, developing out of a short piece to accompany a 1999 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹⁵ The film incorporates footage of interviews with former Hofmann students, who recall his teaching, personality, the atmosphere of the school, and his influence on their work. I have relied on some of the original versions of these interviews in the following discussion. However, Hofmann's ideas are discussed in rather general terms, presumably to appeal to a wider television audience.

¹³ Hunter, 16.

¹⁴ Emily Farnham, *Hofmann: Abstraction as Plastic Expression and Notes Made in Hofmann's Classes* (Provincetown: Emily Farnham, 1999).

¹⁵ *Hans Hofmann: Artist/Teacher, Teacher/Artist*, videocassette, directed by Madeline Amgott (New York: Amgott Productions, 2002).

Even more useful are the interviews conducted by Tina Dickey with dozens of Hofmann's students, in preparation for a forthcoming book about his teaching. Although her manuscript is not yet available, her interviews are deposited at the Archives of American Art. In addition, Tina Dickey's essay "Spatial Constellations: Rhythms of Nature," in a monograph on Hofmann, is a dense and wide-reaching exploration of Hofmann's work and theory.¹⁶ Dickey proclaims the importance of his lectures and manuscripts, linking them to both the New York scene (Clement Greenberg, and the Abstract Expressionists), as well as his European contemporaries and predecessors (Robert Delaunay and Orphism, Goethe, Adolf Hildebrand, and Kandinsky).

Introduction to Hofmann's Ideology

Hofmann's theory revolved around a set of core ideas. For Hofmann, the central problem in painting was how to translate three-dimensional reality into the two-dimensions of the canvas. How can the artist create movement and space without countering the inherent two-dimensionality of the picture plane? He wrote:

The essence of the picture plane is its two-dimensionality. It is possible, through the development of space and light unity to create three-dimensionality on this plane without destroying its essential two-dimensionality.¹⁷

We find in this statement an anticipation of Greenberg's central thesis, the importance of upholding the "integrity" of the picture plane. However, for Hofmann, the goal was to do

¹⁶ Tina Dickey, "Spatial Constellations: Rhythms of Nature" in *Hans Hofmann*, by Helmut Friedel and Tina Dickey (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 81-91.

¹⁷ Hans Hofmann, "Statement," written in Berkeley, July 1931. Published in *Hans Hofmann* (exh. cat., San Francisco: California Palace of the Legion of Honor, 1931). Reprinted in Cynthia Goodman, 1990, 163.

this while simultaneously creating a sense of space. Hofmann's theory rested on paradox, and so he declared to his students, "Do not make it flat! But it must stay flat!"¹⁸

Furthermore, Hofmann believed that "appearance" is two-dimensional, while "reality" is "three-dimensional." Hofmann said that we have only "learned through experiences" to interpret appearance as a three-dimensional reality.¹⁹ In other words, we see in flat pictures, and understand space only by our movement around an object.

Hofmann believed that the proper way to create space on the picture plane would therefore not be through modeling or perspective, but by mimicking our perceptual process: our movement around the object, our seeing the object as a series of two-dimensional planes. This could be realized in painting by depicting nature as a multitude of planes, shifting and interacting with one another. Hofmann wrote:

The experience of depth always includes the experience of movement. What we experience in nature as depth is transformed on the picture plane to movement. This is one of the most important plastic insights. Depth can only be expressed by the shifting of planes. The planes shift against one another from right to left and vice-versa and up and down, or the reverse.²⁰

Hofmann's goal was what he termed "plasticity," this creation of three-dimensionality, the push-and-pull of forms on a flat surface.

The essence of his statement above is the idea that forms exist plastically only when they exist *in relation to one another*. Forms have no meaning—they can express nothing—if they exist in isolation. This constant shifting of planes is essential to Hofmann's art and theory, as he believed it was responsible for activating the picture plane and creating a sense of movement. In Hofmann's conception of the picture, both

¹⁸ Hans Hofmann, *Prospectus of the Hofmann School of Fine Arts*, Munich, 1915. Reprinted in both German and English translation, in Seitz, 56.

¹⁹ Hans Hofmann, "The Painter and His Problems: A Manual Dedicated to Painting," 1963, 35-page typescript, Museum of Modern Art Library, New York, 7.

²⁰ Hofmann, "The Painter and His Problems," 21.

positive and negative spaces were equally important, and completely interrelated.

According to Cynthia Goodman, Hofmann affirmed his theory by declaring that the empty areas in Rembrandt's *Night Watch* were the best parts of the painting.²¹

Hofmann differentiated between modern and “academic art,” and instructed that three-dimensionality should not be created by using “Italian perspective” because it does not mimic our mental understanding of space, which is dependent on movement. By “Italian perspective,” Hofmann likely referred to 16th-century painters like Raphael, who emphasized the rigorous application of linear perspective, as opposed to earlier masters like Giotto. Hofmann wrote:

Italian perspective encompasses only one main line of movement on the picture plane: away from the spectator into the depth toward a vanishing point on a horizontal line. The result is one-sided movement. Space conceived in this fashion has no depth echo, it is petrified and without life.²²

Also central to Hofmann's theory was his concept of *empathy* – a term he used to describe the artist's spiritual and psychic response process to nature. I have mentioned above Hofmann's insistence that there is a disjuncture between how we see and what the reality is. This fascinated the artist, because it opened up the possibilities for subjectivity, creativity, and spirituality. Hofmann wrote:

The eye does not see in three dimensions. The eye only grasps the appearance, and the child must learn to interpret appearance with the help of other sense experiences. From experience, consciousness is developed. We learn to think. So our intellect develops.... Therefore the process of seeing is invariably accompanied by feeling projection. ... To see, perception must become experience through the active function of projection that connects the ego with the external world. In this way a psycho-spiritual picture of the world develops within us that becomes the pictorial basis for creation.²³

²¹ Goodman, “Hans Hofmann as a Teacher,” 123.

²² Hofmann, *Painter's Primer*, n.p.

²³ *Ibid.*

Hofmann believed vehemently in the personal and spiritual nature of art. Empathy implied the artist's personal identification with nature and reality, and an understanding of the subjective nature of this process informed Hofmann's writing. Hofmann considered that creativity was a force of cosmic energy, writing:

In my own way of search as artist, the universe seems to be a will-directed magnetic entity with all life embedded in it. It is figuratively speaking, a vast ocean that holds the sum total of all energy and the potentiality of all forces.... A picture is in the same way a universe – it holds its own life and mirrors a mind and a soul. Within all these laws seem to be a directing will and we are also directed by this will – this will is the urge to create – it is a cosmic will that determines all creation.²⁴

Like his contemporaries, Kandinsky, Apollinaire, Kupka, and Malevich, Hofmann was also interested in the concept of a fourth dimension. He wrote:

With the acceptance of the Theory of Relativity by Einstein the fourth dimension has come into the realm of natural science. The first and second dimension include the world of appearance, the third holds reality within it, the fourth dimension is the realm of the spirit and imagination, of feeling and sensibility. All cultural interests are, in their final analysis, filled with the urge to give content and substance to life. All profound content in life originates from the highest phenomenon of the soul: from intuition, and thereby is found the fourth dimension. Art is the expression of this dimension realized through the other dimensions.²⁵

Hofmann's writings may seem didactic on the surface, but he was actually a dialectical thinker who believed in the power of moderating and even contradicting any rules or belief systems. His primary ideas about appearance versus reality, flatness and depth, are dialectical constructs. The element of contradiction and synthesis is central to Hofmann's ideology, as are his beliefs in the spiritual / personal nature of art-making.

²⁴ Hans Hofmann, January 12, 1956, typescript, estate of the artist. Reprinted in Goodman, 1990, 176.

²⁵ Hans Hofmann, "Art in America." *The Art Digest* 4 (August 1930), 27.

The Roots of Hofmann's Ideas in German Modernist Theory

Although Hofmann's ideas are closely related to Cubism and to the theories of Cézanne, they are also rooted in German modernist theory. Hofmann's connection to German theorists is rarely acknowledged, and has never been explored in depth.²⁶ His writing is especially akin to that of Adolf Hildebrand, Kandinsky, and Wilhelm Worringer. Much of Hofmann's theory is likely based in the writings of Hildebrand, the German sculptor, whose book *The Problem of Form*, was written in 1893.²⁷ Hofmann's interest in this text is documented.²⁸ Hildebrand wrote "vision is in its very nature two-dimensional."²⁹ He continued, "To perceive in visual images the third dimension, however, we must imagine ourselves as changing our point of view, and as getting merely a succession of disconnected shifting views of the object more or less in profile."³⁰ For Hildebrand, therefore, movement was tied to three-dimensionality. Hildebrand divided perceptual processes into two categories: "pure visual," which referred to seeing reality in a way that resembled a two-dimensional picture, and "mixed

²⁶ Irving Sandler's essay, "Hans Hofmann: The Dialectical Master," in Goodman, 1990, is one of the only essays to position Hofmann's entire "cosmology" as shaped by German models. Sandler considers Hofmann a dialectical thinker. He notes the influence of Hildebrand, and positions Hofmann in terms of his early interest in science. Hofmann's conception of abstraction was quite similar to Kandinsky's. Cynthia Goodman, in Goodman, *Hans Hofmann* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986) acknowledges Hofmann's debt to German theorists and writers, and she mentions that Hofmann cited Worringer, Goethe, and Hildebrand in his teaching. However, she does not include specific textual citations to support this statement. Gail Levin, in her essay, "Kandinsky and Abstract Expressionism," in *Theme and Variation: Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912-1950*, by Gail Levin and Marianne Lorenz (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992), 192-222, affirms the importance of Kandinsky's influence on Hofmann. She suggests not only that Hofmann shared an interest in the spiritual, and metaphysical elements of art, but also that Hofmann may have adopted iconographic motifs from Kandinsky. The essay by Helmut Friedel, "'To sense the invisible and to be able to create it—that is art,'" in Friedel and Dickey, 1998, also begins to establish the relationship between Hofmann and Kandinsky. Tina Dickey's essay, "Spatial Constellations: Rhythms of Nature," also in Friedel and Dickey, 1998, includes a short passage on Hofmann's interest in Hildebrand.

²⁷ Adolf Hildebrand, *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture*, trans. Max Meyer and Robert Morris Ogden (New York: G.E. Stechert & Co., 1907),

²⁸ Cynthia Goodman in Goodman, 1986, states that Hofmann assigned the text to all of his students in Munich.

²⁹ Hildebrand, 29.

³⁰ Hildebrand, 31.

visual-kinesthetic” to describe how we visually form an understanding of nature’s three-dimensionality. Hildebrand, therefore, recommended that a sense of three-dimensionality can be created on a picture plane by suggesting movement. Hildebrand’s discussion of the dual forms of vision culminates in the following statement, a recognition of the paradoxical nature of art-making:

The painter gives on a plane a visual impression of a three-dimensional form, while the sculptor forms something three-dimensional for the purpose of affording a plane visual impression.³¹

In other words, the artist must counter the inherent laws of his medium.

However, one must recognize the subtleties of Hildebrand’s statement. He was certainly not advocating that a painting, because it is flat, should aim for some false sense of *trompe-l’oeil* illusionism. Hildebrand wrote that spatial ideas should be produced “indirectly” rather than directly, and he wrote about the “unpleasant” “deception” of that ultimate illusionistic art form, the panorama.³²

The importance of creating space in a painting, while retaining a sense of the innate flatness of the picture plane, is a major part of Kandinsky’s theory as well. Kandinsky wrote about the acknowledgement of painting as a flat plane, but believed one must fight against an inert, flat quality in painting, which would result in a merely *decorative* work. Kandinsky wrote:

...there are other means of both retaining the material surface and constituting an ideal surface, not only fixing the latter as a flat plane, but also of exploiting it as a three-dimensional space. The very thinness or thickness of a line, the positioning of the form upon the surface, the superimposition of one form upon another provide sufficient examples of the linear extension of space. Similar possibilities are offered by the correct use of color which can recede or advance, strive forward or

³¹ Hildebrand, 34.

³² See Hildebrand, 55-57.

backward, and turn the picture into a being hovering in mid-air, which signifies the same as the pictorial extension of space.³³

Like Kandinsky, Hofmann felt the need to differentiate between the abstract conception of painting and the decorative arts. For both artists, it was the element of space and plasticity that separated successful abstract painting from design. It is only with this in mind that we can fully comprehend the importance of Hofmann's famous tenet "push-and pull."

Hofmann's ideas about the relationship between abstraction and nature are also quite similar to Kandinsky's. Kandinsky, in *On the Spiritual in Art*, addressed the question of whether nature, or life, should be renounced completely in painting. He wrote:

The more freely abstract the form becomes, the purer, and also the more primitive it sounds. Therefore, in a composition in which corporeal elements are more or less superfluous, they can be more or less omitted and replaced by purely abstract forms, or by corporeal forms that have been completely abstracted. . . . Here we are confronted by the question: Must we not then renounce the object altogether, throw it to the winds and instead lay bare the purely abstract? This is a question that naturally arises, the answer to which is at once indicated by an analysis of the concordance of the two elements of form (the objective and the abstract). Just as every word spoken (tree, sky, man) awakens an inner vibration, so too does every pictorially represented object. To deprive oneself of the possibility of this calling up vibrations would be to narrow one's arsenal of expressive means. At least, that is how it is today. But apart from today's answer, the above question receives the eternal answer to every question in art that begins with "must." There is no "must" in art, which is forever free.³⁴

³³ Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Peter Vergo, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, eds. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, 2 vols. (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 195.

³⁴ Kandinsky, Vergo, 169-70. By 1914, Kandinsky had made notations to his text *On the Spiritual in Art* to reflect his idea that "a few artists" could attain "pure abstract form." By this year as well he experimented with what he termed "pure abstraction." Although these notations were not made in the German editions of the text, they were reflected in the English translation by F. Golffing, M. Harrison, and F. Ostertag (G. Wittenborn, New York, 1947). See Rose-Carol Washton Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 7, 158.

Similarly, Hofmann believed that one should not be bound to objective reality, but he considered nature an indispensable stimulus to expression. Like Kandinsky, Hofmann's descriptions of the process of art-making begin with nature, filtered through the artist's personal vision, and awareness of pictorial principles.

The concept of "empathy" which interested Hofmann, was defined by Wilhelm Worringer in his 1908 text, *Abstraction and Empathy*. Worringer wrote, "Aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment. To enjoy aesthetically means to enjoy myself in a sensuous object diverse from myself, to empathise myself into it."³⁵ Hofmann also defined the term "empathy" and included it in a diagram illustrating the progression from nature to art. This diagram accompanied one of Hofmann's writings, entitled "Terms."³⁶ Hofmann considered empathy a process of identification, and also "the intuitive faculty to sense qualities of formal and spatial relations, or tensions, and to discover the plastic and psychological qualities of form and color."³⁷ Empathy, for Hofmann implied the ability to find the "art"—the "painterly qualities"—in nature. Hofmann undoubtedly found intense joy and beauty in life and the meditation of nature. Friends describe his delight in driving through the roads of Cape Cod, stopping to point out a beautiful scene. He found aesthetic pleasure in less obvious sources. A student recalled that if there were no still life set up immediately available for the class to work from, Hofmann would crumple a piece of paper and place it by the window, and remark with awe, "Look at the passages of light and dark, the shapes."³⁸ Hofmann's perceptual joy is not simply an

³⁵ Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 5.

³⁶ In *The Search for the Real and Other Essays*, 76-78.

³⁷ Hofmann, "Terms," in *The Search for the Real and Other Essays*, 77.

³⁸ Irvin Kershner, in *Hans Hofmann: Artist/Teacher, Teacher/Artist*, Amgott Productions. PBS, June 2003.

element of personality, but rather, a crucial aspect in understanding his painting and teaching.

Introduction to Hofmann's Students

A short discussion of the relationship between Hofmann's writings and his teaching is warranted here. Mercedes Matter stated that she believed his public lectures were quite different from his classroom presence, feeling that Hofmann was more didactic and rigid as a public lecturer than in the studio classroom. Paul Resika has maintained that Hofmann's students were not reading their teacher's writing, despite the fact that typescripts were occasionally distributed in the school. According to Resika, the students did not know what to make of Hofmann's texts, and instead their preferred artist-written text was John Graham's *System and Dialectics of Art*.³⁹ Certainly Hofmann's aura and energetic, electric personality formed a large part of his teaching, and are absent from his rather dry, wordy, repetitive and often confounding texts. In class, Hofmann would critique a single student's work, but the others were expected to follow and listen to his advice. He spoke loudly, forcefully; he moved with drama and dynamism as he corrected students' drawings. Students crowded around him, rapt, as if magnetically attracted to his voice and physical presence. However, Hofmann's thick German accent made him difficult to understand. Students often had no idea what he was saying. Thus, there was an informal tradition of older students helping to explain some of Hofmann's ideas to the newer ones. Resika recalls one such painter, William Freed, explaining Hofmann's ideas and the way the school worked as they traveled home together on the subway at night. Albert Kresch believes that Hofmann's physicality was

³⁹ John Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art* (New York: Delphic Studios, 1937).

part of his teaching. “He was big – broad-shouldered, fairly tall, even wide. He could use the physical more than a lot of other people.... He had great speed as he worked. The speed must have been to capture an intuitive feeling. His own movements were like the movements of a figure in space.”⁴⁰ Hofmann’s charismatic presence is not conveyed in his analytic texts. That said, the writings certainly contain and probably further explicate the same core ideas that informed his teaching. His writing will be analyzed here with the understanding that while not every concept was precisely a part of the classroom experience, the larger and more general set of ideas was at the heart of Hofmann’s lessons.

Most of the students of Hofmann who will be discussed in this dissertation would argue that there is no difference between abstract and representational painting. Matter has said, “Abstract painting just means that you know what you're doing. You know what the language of painting is, therefore it becomes abstract. It can be as representational as a Rembrandt self-portrait or as removed from representation as Mondrian. But it's still abstract.”⁴¹ Rosemarie Beck (who was not a Hofmann student) stated similarly, “When I am working on a still life, I look at the objects....The still life is seen. But that doesn't mean it's not abstract.”⁴² Viewing a representational painting as abstract stems from the artists’ insistence on issues of space, form, rhythm, color, and the picture plane, as equally, or more important than the subject. For many of these painters, the subject became simply an excuse for dealing with form, color, and shape.

⁴⁰ Albert Kresch, interview by author, tape recording, 30 May 2007, New York.

⁴¹ Mercedes Matter, interview by Tina Dickey, Madeline Amgott, and Vic Losic, transcript, 7 June 1998, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C., 16.

⁴² Rosemarie Beck, interview by author, tape recording, 7 November 2002, New York.

The ability to view painting in this way is surely due to Hofmann's example, a painter who in his own work moved between representation and abstraction with ease, and who taught his students to paint abstractly by working from the figure and the still life. Hofmann considered nature an indispensable stimulus to expression, but he believed that one should not be bound to objective reality. Similarly, for Hofmann, abstraction was a way of demonstrating the possibilities of a modernist conception of space and color's capacity for expression, but it was not meant as an end-game strategy. The ability to reconcile figuration with an abstract understanding of form and space would remain with Hofmann's students throughout their careers.

The label "figurative painter" is therefore deeply problematic to refer to this group of painters. Some, like Leland Bell, would adamantly refuse to discuss any issues of content. Beck recalls being on a panel discussion with Bell, and when she asked him about a painting that depicted a man and woman in bed, "Am I right in thinking that this means the loss of innocence?" that "he was furious."⁴³ Instead Bell reserved public lectures for discussion of the rhythm, movement, and spatial organization of his or others' paintings.

Paul Georges, when asked how he had approached a painting, in terms of the process of working from life and the model, reminded the interviewer: "It isn't important what [representational elements] I started with. What I'm interested in are these [formal] principles.... Those are the things that make it a good painting.... Even the expression comes out of the form." In the same interview, Georges also stated, "Every painting is abstract."⁴⁴

⁴³ Rosemarie Beck, interview by author, tape recording, 7 November 2002, New York.

⁴⁴ Paul Georges, interview by author, transcript, 16 March 2000, New York.

The artists discussed in this dissertation studied with Hofmann during different periods. Matter was the earliest, entering his class at the Art Students League in 1932, and then attending his own school on 8th Street. Kresch, Blaine, De Niro, and Matthiasdottir all knew one another at the school in the period between 1942-44. Kresch and De Niro, in these years, attended open house evenings of artists, poets, and writers, on Fridays at poet Kenneth Patchen's house. There Kresch was introduced to Leland Bell. Bell never studied with Hofmann, although he would frequently meet his friends in front of the school, and through them was certainly aware of Hofmann's general ideas. Blaine and Kresch called him one day to let him know "two pretty Icelandic girls" had joined the class: it was Matthiasdottir and her friend Nina Trygvadottir. Bell and Matthiasdottir were married in 1944. This entire group would remain close, lifelong friends. Resika studied with Hofmann in 1945-47, and recalls meeting Georges during the Provincetown summer session in 1947. He was told by a friend, "there's someone on the lawn talking about intervals you might want to meet." As many have noted, Hofmann's teaching was fluid and ever-evolving; so that the artists discussed here certainly had different experiences studying with him. However, I will not address such changes here. Rather, I will focus on the set of core ideas which remained with Hofmann over several decades and informed his major text, the *Painter's Primer*.

Introduction to Hofmann's unpublished treatise, the *Painter's Primer*

The *Painter's Primer* is Hofmann's most extensive statement on art. It was intended as a "manual" for the young artist or student; therefore, it is particularly relevant to explore the substance of his teaching. Hofmann first wrote it in German in the

summers of 1932-33, when he was teaching at the University of California, Berkeley. It was translated into English the same summer by Glenn Wessels, a former student in Munich who was instrumental in bringing Hofmann to the United States.⁴⁵ Hofmann rewrote a German version in 1933, and then revised it in the fall of 1948 in New York. This final version (which Hofmann referred to as the third German version), was translated into English by Georgina (Peggy) Huck. I have used Huck's translation here, both because it represents a final extant version, and because it is in the most complete state of all the available versions.⁴⁶ Huck's translation was clearly approved by the artist, as he acknowledged in his own (unpublished) introductions and memoranda for proposed, but unrealized, anthologies of his writing.⁴⁷

The *Painter's Primer* is organized into eight sections. The first, which Hofmann called the "Philosophical Section," is basically an introduction. It sets the stage philosophically for Hofmann's ideas, while the following seven sections are more technical explorations of the means and possibilities available to the artist, and discussions of inherent traits of picture-making elements like the picture plane, color, and planes. Hofmann began his "Philosophical Section" by differentiating between artistic

⁴⁵ Hofmann considered the translation done by Wessels a confidential document, perhaps because it was unpublished. In a "memorandum" for a later version, Hofmann accuses Wessels of disseminating the text without permission, believing he gave a copy to Earle Loran, who then plagiarized his ideas, using them as the basis for his book, *Cezanne's Composition*. Hofmann also connects Wessels' indiscretion to Sheldon Cheney's use of Hofmann's theory as the basis for several chapters of his *Expressionism in Art* (1934). However, he accepts Cheney's work, as Cheney, unlike Loran, acknowledged Hofmann as the source of the ideas.

⁴⁶ Many incomplete versions, both typescript and manuscript, are held by the Archives of American Art, New York and Washington, D.C. in the Hans Hofmann Papers. Most typescript drafts are accompanied by copious handwritten pages and notes. The various drafts and notes for the book are unfortunately not clearly labeled as to their date of revision, so they are difficult to compare. A relatively complete version in the original German is held by the Archives of American Art, which appears to correlate to Huck's translation used here. Huck's translation appears complete and generally uninterrupted by handwritten notes. The only obvious missing element is the diagrams, referred to within the text, but lacking amongst the pages. A few diagrams which appear intended for the *Painter's Primer* can be found among Hofmann's other drafts, but it is difficult to correlate them authoritatively.

⁴⁷ Hans Hofmann papers, Archives of American Art, New York and Washington, D.C.

“form” and the form of an object in reality. He was differentiating, in other words, between the subjective expression and an objective description or illustration. Artistic form comes from the intellect, from expression, and from the creative process. He asserted that the artistic form is of primary importance, as opposed to the content, when he wrote, “A work of art cannot be truly expressive, strong, and inwardly great if its form is weak. The form of a work of art is its quality.”⁴⁸ Perhaps most importantly, Hofmann stated that visual experience, and “plastic creation”—the visual expression of spatial experience space—is something which “evades the great majority of people almost entirely.” However, he believed it is a skill can be learned by the artist, until it becomes “second nature.” In the next pages, Hofmann proceeded to outline his basic set of ideas. He stated his belief that feeling and emotion (empathy) play a part in perception. He discussed the dualism of seeing in two dimensions, but experiencing the world three-dimensionally. He maintained that movement (and counter-movement, tensions, and rhythm) are inherent to the expression of space and life. Finally, he wrote, it is by expressing the relationships between pictorial elements that a sensation of movement is produced within a picture.

Section II of the *Painter's Primer* / Education and Work of Paul Georges

In the second section of his *Painter's Primer*, Hofmann described the decline of Impressionism, and the rise of Cubism. This section most clearly reflects the origins of Hofmann's ideas in the theory of Cézanne. Hofmann quoted Cézanne's statement to Emile Bernard in 1904:

⁴⁸ Hofmann, *Painter's Primer*.

Let me repeat what I have already said: In nature you must see everything that is in perspective in relation to the cylinder, the sphere and the cone in such a way that each side – each surface – of the object moves into the depth in relation to a central point.⁴⁹

In this section, Hofmann discussed the limitations and problems with what he terms the “Italian” conception of perspective. He found in Cézanne a profound rebuttal of this traditional device. In traditional Italian perspective, form moves away from the spectator into the depth to a vanishing point. Hofmann believed, however, that the picture plane is an object with limitations, and that these limitations should be upheld through the composition. Therefore he rejected the idea of suggested space and depth beyond the picture plane. Rather he insisted that “the image must be bounded by a beginning and an end.... The composition begins and ends with the outside lines of a picture plane.”⁵⁰ Hofmann was fascinated by the “central point” of which Cézanne spoke. He continued, “In our concept the space conditions a central movement organization.” He considered Cézanne’s idea the beginning of a “plastic understanding of nature” – in other words, how nature can be translated into an authentic rendering of the way we see, while retaining movement and depth on the two-dimensional picture plane. While Italian perspective, with its vanishing point, suggests a boundlessness of the image, a modern plastic perspective positions the viewer at the center, around which movement is organized, ending at the outer lines of the picture.

Paul Georges, who studied with Hofmann only in one Provincetown summer session in 1947, nonetheless explained his own paintings in terms of Hofmann’s theory as

⁴⁹ Cézanne, as cited by Hofmann, *Painter’s Primer*. Cézanne’s original quote comes from a letter to Emile Bernard, 15 April 1904. See Michael Doran, ed., *Conversations with Cézanne* (Berkeley: University of California Press, Berkeley, 2001), 29. In this anthology, Cézanne’s words to Bernard are translated as the following: “Let me repeat what I told you when you were here: Render nature with the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone, arranged in perspective so that each side of an object or of a plane is directed toward a central point.”

⁵⁰ Hofmann, *Painter’s Primer*.

recently as two years before his own death. In an interview with this author, he explained the formal issues he strove for, recognizing that they came from his time with Hofmann: “After twenty years of thinking about what [Hofmann] taught me, that’s what I understood, and that’s my version of it.”⁵¹

Georges saw his formal ideas about painting, as well as his life-path, in terms of a quest for freedom. As Stanley Grand notes in his Ph.D. dissertation on the artist, Georges traced this quest to his experience in World War II. He survived an enemy attack that left friends and comrades dead. Realizing that he also “should have been killed,” he “just assumed from then on I was free.”⁵² After the war, Georges returned to Oregon (he was born in Portland), to study painting at the University of Oregon, Eugene. There he worked with Jack Wilkinson, who taught a system of points and intervals. Another Oregon teacher encouraged him to study with Hofmann.

In 1964, a self portrait by Georges was included in an exhibition circulated by the Museum of Modern Art, *Hans Hofmann and his Students*. Apparently, Hofmann stood in front of the painting, and affirmed “He gets it.” Georges considered it one of his proudest moments.⁵³

Georges condensed Hofmann’s lessons into his own core ideas about painting, repeated often in lectures and conversations with students over the years. He most related to Hofmann’s ideas about perspective and the horizon line. In the section of the *Painter’s Primer* discussed above, Hofmann wrote that “Italian perspective encompasses only one main line of movement on the picture plane: away from the spectator into the

⁵¹ Georges, interview by author, 16 March 2000.

⁵² Stanley Grand, “Allegories of Freedom in the Paintings of Paul Georges” Ph.D. diss., Madison: The University of Washington, 1993); Paul Georges, interview by Karl Fortess, October 1969, tape recording, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

⁵³ Yvette Georges, the daughter of Paul Georges, in conversation with the author, 11 May 2007.

depth toward a vanishing point on a horizontal line. The result is one-sided movement. Space conceived in this fashion is... without life.”⁵⁴ These ideas stem from Cézanne, who rejected one-point perspective in favor of a system that reflected a more active perceptual process. Cézanne told Bernard that “Lines parallel to the horizon give breadth...[and] lines perpendicular to this horizon give depth. But nature, for us men, is more depth than surface, whence the necessity of introducing in our vibrations of light – represented by reds and yellow – a sufficient quantity of blue to give the feeling of air.”⁵⁵

Georges eventually understood that the lifelessness of one-point perspective was related to its inability to communicate our constantly shifting experience in nature. (As Hofmann wrote, “Nature is boundless in its changeability and invention of new relationships.”⁵⁶) Georges believed that, in nature, our experience with the horizon line is constantly in flux, based on our own movements and shifts of point-of-view. (These sorts of movements and changes in perspective are reflected in Cézanne’s still lifes, for example, with their “uneven” tabletop edges.) Georges was fond of demonstrating his theory in lectures and interviews by suggesting that we look at an object in relation to a line on the wall, and then crouch down, bending our knees, to see how the line “shifted” in relation to the object, in accordance with our movement.

The problem, Georges maintained, was how to represent these shifts within a painting. If the painting included a straight horizontal line, Georges believed that the painting would be “fixed” or static, because the movement, the shifts, the freedom of nature would not be communicated. He stated, “The only way you can be free is if you

⁵⁴ Hofmann, *Painter’s Primer*.

⁵⁵ Cézanne, letter to Emile Bernard, 15 April 1904. See Doran, ed., *Conversations with Cézanne* (Berkeley: 29.

⁵⁶ Hofmann, *Painter’s Primer*.

get away from the horizon. The [horizon] line kills the painting, because it's stuck – not free.”⁵⁷ Georges believed that, unlike nature, a painting had “limitations” – because it is a two dimensional surface, unlike the three-dimensional real world, where shifts and movements are inherent. He considered this the central problem in art and that his own work represented a constant attempt to deal with it. He also based his teaching around the issue. He stated, “Once you understand the limitations of painting, you can do anything.”⁵⁸ Georges offered specific solutions, such as eliminating the horizon line, and continually balancing the viewpoint of the artist / spectator. Certain elements of the representation must be seen from above, bringing the eye down, and others seen from below, bringing the eye up. This would mimic the shifts of nature, and eliminate the binding form of a horizon line. Georges liked to explain this idea using his painting, *Self-Portrait with Model in Studio*, 1967-68 (fig. 1.1). Perhaps this was the painting in which Georges first fully realized the principles learned from Hofmann. As noted above, Georges said he spent twenty years thinking about what Hofmann taught, and this painting was, incidentally, done twenty years after that Provincetown summer.

In the painting, the artist is represented seated in the studio in front of a reclining nude model; tubes of paint, rags, and brushes are shown in the immediate foreground; and the eye is led back into an extreme depth of space, with a wall of windows and a dining table and chairs at the end of a long loft-like space. Although the represented interior seems completely of a piece in Georges' representation, it actually represents two different spaces. It was painted in both his New York loft, and his Sagaponack, Long Island studio. “I did half of it in one place and half of it in another place ... I did the

⁵⁷ Georges, interview by author, 16 March 2000.

⁵⁸ Paul Georges, *On His Work*, lecture given at the New York Studio School, 10 November 1994, Videocassette.

figure in the country.... and then I put in all that stuff from the loft. I think that art is artificial. You do whatever you feel like doing, and you don't let anything get in your way. You especially don't let nature get in your way. If I don't like what I did, and I take the painting somewhere else, I just change it."⁵⁹ Working in two different locations furthered Georges's goal of making the painting more "free." He has said, "If you separate the parts of a painting you can make it free."⁶⁰ About this particular painting he also explained, "It was important, almost, to do it in two different places, because I wanted to 'unstick' the planes. And if you put a line behind somebody, the planes stick. The idea of painting is to free the space, and make it all swing."⁶¹

In this painting, the artist is shown with hands separated widely. One hand points downward, leaning on his upper leg, and the other is raised up, palm facing forward and fingers slightly spread. The gesture is specific – it seems to carry a message like "So, what now?" or "Hey, here is my life, my work." But Georges maintained the positioning of the hands is used for purely formal reasons: to assist in giving the painting a balance of upward and downward movements. The downward pointing arm leads us further down in the scene, to the paint tubes, cans, brush and rag. We see these items as if from above. And the upward raising arm leads us up past the nude into the depths of the loft, which we see as if we were crouching down on the floor. Georges stated:

If you start at the bottom then everything else is up and it is like making music with a scale that only goes up. And in painting from the bottom, there is no down. So you have to make an artificial up, in order to get it down. That hand in the air makes all that other stuff down from it. That's what gives it the music.⁶²

⁵⁹ Georges, interview by author, 16 March 2000.

⁶⁰ Georges, *On His Work*.

⁶¹ Georges, interview by author, 16 March 2000.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Section III of the *Painter's Primer* / Education and Work of Mercedes Matter

In his section *Visual Command of Nature: Supra-Sensory Factors in Form*, Hofmann emphasized the importance of seeing objects and form in relation to one another. He argued that we do not see objects in an individual, isolated fashion, but rather we experience their relationships. This idea was at the heart of Hofmann's ideology and teaching: the relationship of forms and planes activates the surface, creating rhythm and movement. A single shape or form is unmoving, and without meaning if it is not juxtaposed with another. Therefore, in this section, Hofmann focused on the idea of "proportions" and "proportionate relationships." Central to his challenge was his contention that appearance is different from reality. He suggested that we do not see actual groups of objects, but rather we experience their interactions with one another in space. He wrote that when we look at a group of objects:

... we do not see the actual mass of objects, but their proportionate relationships in appearance and this is the plastic starting point for the representation.... Visual experience does not result from a composite setting-together of separate visual fragments. That which is seen becomes experience only through the intensity of proportionate relationships in their unifying effect on us.⁶³

If we take the example of the still life to analyze Hofmann's statement, then he was suggesting that we do not see, separately, the shape and outline of the apple, the vase, the tablecloth, and so forth, as autonomous objects. Rather we see these objects purely in their visual relationship to one another as they exist in this particular time and space. We do not see them as they exist in solitary "reality;" instead, we see their appearance as it is altered by juxtaposition.

⁶³ Hofmann, *Painter's Primer*.

Hofmann believed that “proportions” and “proportional relationships” are not measurable or exact, but instead are subject to artist’s individual and emotional interpretation. He wrote, for example, that only if a line is divided equally in half, is there an uncomplicated division. Otherwise, a complex relationship exists. It is the mission of the artist to comprehend and interpret such a relationship. The artist’s individual understanding and translation of these relationships is also at the core of what Hofmann considered the “plastic experience of nature,” and its “plastic realization” in art.

The relationship between objects, and the probing of the nature of these relationships, was central to the work of Mercedes Matter (1913-2001), who studied with Hofmann in 1932-34 first at the Art Students League, and then at his own school. Matter and her family would also become lifelong friends of Hofmann and his wife. Born Mercedes Carles, she was the daughter of American modernist painter Arthur B. Carles, and the musician, actress and artist Mercedes de Cordoba Carles. (Her parents were living separately by the time of her birth in 1913.) In 1941 she married the Swiss photographer and graphic designer Herbert Matter. Arthur B. Carles and Hofmann had first met in Paris sometime between 1904 and 1914, but were re-introduced by Matter in the winter of 1932-33. At this point, they became close friends and artistic confidantes. Matter and Hofmann reputedly also developed a romantic relationship in these years. Hofmann, Matter, and Carles spent the summer of 1934 together in Gloucester, Massachusetts, sharing a house called the “Little Studio” on Eastern Point, a peninsula projecting forty miles across the ocean. Matter recalled the “lovely, house near the most heavenly bay... with a huge rock on one side that you couldn't reach except at high tide, [with] flowers growing in crevices...a wonderful place to go and sit.” Hofmann had not

been painting for years – his energy was consumed by years of teaching – and it was on this rock that Matter remembers suggesting he begin again. She recounted:

He was very, very depressed. I said "What's wrong?" and he said, well, "All those years of the school in Munich mean nothing to me compared to the fact [that] I didn't make one painting. I'm just so depressed.... So I said "Well, Hans, if you're feeling that way, why don't you just go right to town now, right now, and buy paint and canvas and come tomorrow morning and start painting."⁶⁴

Hofmann, in fact, did begin painting again that summer. Barbara Wolanin, the Carles scholar, who wrote about the interaction of Matter, Carles and Hofmann in the 1934 summer, believes that “it was his return to painting that transformed him and carried into the creation of his own school of art in Provincetown in 1935.”⁶⁵ As Wolanin discussed, Hofmann was not the only one who benefited from this interaction. Matter, who had been deprived of much time with her father for her entire childhood, was close to him, and more able to assimilate her father’s ideas and respect through Hofmann’s mediation. Carles, who had been isolated in the 1930s as an American artist in the 1930s interested in European modernism, felt understood by Hofmann. When Carles and Hofmann first met, they apparently talked non-stop for thirty-six hours, foregoing sleep in their excitement to meet a like-minded artist. Matter wrote, “Although I never studied formally with my father, what I learned from Hofmann made me better understand my father’s criticisms of my work and his conversations about art.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Matter, interview with Dickey, Amgott, and Losic.

⁶⁵ Barbara Wolanin, “Prelude to Provincetown: Hofmann, Matter, Carles, and the Legacy of their 1934 Gloucester Summer,” in *From Hawthorne to Hofmann: Provincetown Vignettes 1899-1945* (exh. cat., New York: Hollis Taggart Galleries, 2004), 45.

⁶⁶ Mercedes Matter, “Autobiography,” in *Mercedes Matter: Drawings* (exh. cat, New York: New York Studio School, 1996), n.p.

Matter was studying with Hofmann at the Art Students League and walking with her teacher in Manhattan, when she suddenly understood what she considered the essence of his teaching, and she experienced a turning-point in her work. She recalled:

We were walking up Central Park West [at about 60th Street] and [I saw Central Park West as] just an enormous diagonal to 110th Street - the Park on one side and all the buildings, and this tremendous diagonal. And he said “You see, appearance is different than what you know about reality. I mean, you know that it's a long street going up to 110th, but if you look at it from the point of view of appearance, and in relation to what you are facing, which is the surface of your canvas, you see quite differently ... And suddenly everything connected with the surface that I had to deal with. That was the beginning of everything for me. It was like a thunderbolt. I was overwhelmed with the excitement of seeing that connection. And to me that connection is the basis of painting.”⁶⁷

In that instance, Matter grasped the problem at the heart of Hofmann’s theory: the difference between appearance and reality, the connection between appearance and the two-dimensionality of the picture plane.

The still life paintings that form the majority of Matter’s *oeuvre* reflect Hofmann’s teachings about the complex relationships among objects in space, and how this can be translated into two dimensions. This search—to understand and interpret these interactions—informed Matter’s work completely. In her still lifes, autonomous objects dissolve into a deep, rich conversation of color, stroke, line, and angle (see fig.

1.2). Louis Finkelstein wrote of Matter’s work:

At first glance many of Mercedes Matter’s painting seem, like Frenhofer’s fabled last painting in Balzac’s “The Unknown Masterpiece” to be an indecipherable mass of colored brushstrokes. Only after a while can we see that they are representations of real things: still lifes of flowers, skulls, fruits, vases and draperies.... Each mark, as it is put down, establishes a new set of relationships among all the marks that are there, both as an

⁶⁷ Matter, interview by Dickey, Amgott and Losic, 8.

activation of the picture surface and an analysis of the spatial relations of what is depicted.”⁶⁸

Although Matter was concerned with spatial relations, her paintings always reinforce the picture plane – the hatch marks create a rhythmic tapestry that never recesses back into space. As Matter herself stated, “What I want is depth compressed to the surface.” Her words echo much of Hofmann’s theory and language:

I make extremely complex arrangements emphasizing rhythms that unite the elements and clearly distinct intervals that punctuate the space...It is the configuration that matters to me, the geometry of relations rather than the objects themselves... Coherence in the paintingmust transcend its ingredients to become one, simultaneously present—as one—on that merciless plane of the surface...⁶⁹

Matter explained here how she used the still life as a vehicle for spatial exploration; individual objects were not outlined but instead the multiplicity of planes was utilized for a penetration of the whole picture surface. Matter’s incessant quest to investigate spatial relations would become, in her later work, akin to Giacometti’s existential approach – he was a central influence. However, her commitment to the “geometry of relations,” the “intervals that punctuate space,” and the “rhythms that unite elements” is foremost related to Hofmann’s teaching.

Section IV of the *Painter’s Primer* / Education and Work of Paul Resika

In the fourth section of the *Painter’s Primer*, “The Interrelation of Volumes and Planes,” Hofmann discussed the function of “volumes” and their “gravitational axis” in a painting. He wrote of the necessity to represent everything in nature in terms of a

⁶⁸ Louis Finkelstein, “Paintings of Mercedes Matter, in *Mercedes Matter: Paintings* (exh. cat., New York: Salander O’Reilly Galleries, 1996), n.p.

⁶⁹ Matter, “Statement by Mercedes Matter,” in *Mercedes Matter: Paintings*, 1996.

“fundamental form” – or volume. He considered the basic forms of art the square, the cube, the cylinder, and the sphere. Just as in the previous section he had emphasized that we do not see a mass of objects individually, here he wrote that the artist must depict “the volume of the tree” rather than “a multiplication of branches and leaves.”⁷⁰ Hofmann discussed how these volumes can create movement. He stated that every volume functions in relation to an axis:

In our concept, every substantial volume, no matter how complicated the formation of its details, moves within the scope of its totality around an imaginary horizontal and vertical axis. All movement of volumes are dependent upon ... the spatial relationships of these axes to all other axes... within... the total picture. The relationship awakens a feeling for the unity and inseparability of the representation.⁷¹

In other words, Hofmann believed the artist must translate nature in all its details into primary forms or volumes. The placement of these volumes, in relation to one another, is what creates dynamism and movement. Each volume has an “imaginary” (unarticulated) gravitational axis. The gravitational axis—the center line of an object pointing down to the earth—creates a feeling of suggested rotation either into the depth or toward the foreground. The volume, in other words, performs a suggested rotation around its axis. And as Hofmann wrote, “the stronger the movement of a volume about its gravitational axis into the depth of the space or out of the depth onto the foreground, generally speaking the stronger and more intensive is the sensation of suspense aroused within us.”⁷²

Lest we think that Hofmann was suddenly suggesting the artist can compose using “three-dimensional” or perspectival form, he reminded us that volumes are merely

⁷⁰ Hofmann, *Painter's Primer*.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

“surface pictorializations.” He did not wish the artist to literally create volumes using contour or shading; neither did he wish everything on the surface to remain flat. He ended this section with the reminder that volumes can be broken down to two-dimensional planes. “We feel and we think in volumes. But we must realize our three-dimensional concepts with the aid of two-dimensional form means.” He stated that even in art of the old masters, the objects “function primarily as surface planes.”

In Paul Resika’s mature work, elements of the landscape are translated as what Hofmann termed fundamental forms and volumes. Boats become vessels or triangles; houses become elemental structures – a rectangular solid with a roof. Trees become columns; the sun and moon are circles; figures have spheres for heads and no articulated features. Resika works in series, dealing with the same motif, playing endlessly with the ways that these essential forms can move and relate to one another. By working in this way, he asks, in effect, what happens when I add a volume here, take one away, move one to the right or left? This mode of working is especially apparent beginning with the “Pier Paintings,” a series of paintings Resika made in Provincetown in the 1980s (see fig. 1.3).

Resika studied with Hofmann in 1945-46, when he was seventeen years old and finishing high school. Resika was born in 1928 in New York City, the only child of Sonia Zeltzer and Abraham Resika. The family lived first in the Bronx and then on West 107th Street. His mother, Sonia, who was a Russian-Jewish immigrant and an active Communist, encouraged his artistic interests. She took him to art classes as a young child. At the age of twelve, Resika began studying with Sol Wilson, a painter of romantic seascapes, who showed at Babcock Gallery, and encouraged his students to look

at Courbet, Corot, and especially Albert Ryder. Resika was painting in the manner of his teacher, until he became interested in abstraction. Resika recalls another member of the class, Sonia Rudikoff, painting a still life comprised of flat planes, like an Avery or a Braque.⁷³ Wilson told her, “You’re making it too flat,” expecting her to make more naturalistic seascapes in his manner. Instead, she quit the class. Around the same time, Resika also remembers opening a studio door in his high school, The School of Music and Art, and seeing seniors making abstract painting. Resika remembers, “The door opened, and in a flash we saw the whole thing, everything, about what had to be done – because that’s the way it is. That’s the way things happen – in a flash. Glimpses.”⁷⁴

The impetus for change was furthered when the daughter of family friends, Pennerton West, a painter, encouraged Resika to study with Hofmann. West had been a student of Hofmann’s herself. Resika took night classes at the Hofmann school, while still in high school. In 1946, Resika witnessed the transition there from a small school with just a few students, to the post-GI bill institution, where enrollment exploded, and Hofmann was licensed. Resika was given the coveted “monitor” position at the school, meaning that he had a working scholarship to study day and night, and was responsible to open the school in the morning, set up the model, the chairs and easels, and sweep the floor. In Resika’s second year, he also called the roll: a new requirement that reflected changes in the wake of the GI bill: veterans flooded the school, and were accountable for their attendance.

In Resika’s opinion, the discussion at Hofmann’s school was entirely focused on drawing, while color, tone, and value were not spoken of. In fact, during his period at the

⁷³ Sonia Rudikoff would later study with Hofmann and became a Greenbergian critic.

⁷⁴ Paul Resika, interview by Avis Berman, 20 May 2004, transcript, The National Academy of Design Oral History Project, 1-19.

school, students only drew in class, and would complete paintings in their own time and studios. Resika stated, “Composition was the main thing, and plasticity. He taught how to make the whole thing [the planes] move in and out, so it was tension and not depth [that created movement].”⁷⁵ In a sketch (fig. 1.4), Resika demonstrated to Tina Dickey the famous corrections Hofmann would make to a student’s drawing by tearing and rearranging the sheet, to create space in an otherwise static depiction. By shifting the lower portion of the drawing to the right, a “jump between near and far” (the figure’s legs versus the upper body) is created. As Resika stated, “A two dimensional shift makes a three dimensional space. ... This turned out to be the truth of all drawing, Rembrandt drawing. [Hofmann] talked about Rembrandt drawing a lot.”⁷⁶ Resika felt that this essence of Hofmann’s teaching was “the key” to making a great painting. “Hofmann had the key. You just knew it. You knew you were in the circle of the righteous. The others were damned. [The shifting of planes to create depth] ties into everything. Everything good. Everything plastic. It’s the same.”⁷⁷

For Resika, another essential aspect of Hofmann’s approach was what he described as “his life force.” “Hofmann had this great vitality. The pace of his work is always fast, unlike Picasso or Matisse or Braque who can be fast and slow.”⁷⁸ He remembers that the artists Hofmann seemed to revere included Rubens, Picasso, but especially Michelangelo. “It was [Michelangelo’s] drawing and the planes and the vitality, force, tactile quality [that Hofmann admired].”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Paul Resika, interview by author, tape recording, 14 November 2002, New York.

⁷⁶ Paul Resika, interview by Tina Dickey, 6 May 1998, transcript, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C., 17.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

Although Resika still conjures the passions of a recent convert in remembering Hofmann's ideas, he would rebel against his teacher. Having never received an "academic" training, Resika felt deprived of certain lessons, particularly anatomy. Resika states, "[Hofmann] had a superb academic training, and could draw anything. He knew anatomy which you can see in his corrections. This training he denied to his students."⁸⁰ Resika would spend the next decade trying to recover what he felt was missing from his education. This surprising aesthetic voyage – which Resika undertook in relative isolation, not showing again until 1964 – will be covered in the following chapter. But by the 1980s, Resika had seemingly returned to many of Hofmann's core values. And as Resika himself often allows, he has come full circle, and is perhaps closest to Hofmann right now.

The paintings of Jack's Island, Maine, which Resika made in 2006, show nature as elemental forms and volumes. As Mark Strand wrote in a recent exhibition catalogue:

In looking at Resika's work, one senses two things simultaneously: that nature despite its complexity has been partially transformed into an idealized place of circles, half-circles, triangles, and straight lines, and that the feel of the out-of-doors – the depth of sky, the outline of island or distant mountain, the sun, the moon – is palpable and has not been compromised.⁸¹

In one of these paintings, *Les Coulisses*, 2006 (fig. 1.5), a verdant mountainscape becomes two opposing curved and triangular volumes. A boat is shown as a triangle, the moon (or sun?) is a circle, and a tree is a slightly angular column. In each of these forms, the gravitational axis is strongly felt; each one occupies its own space clearly and with weighty purpose.

⁸⁰ Resika, interview by Dickey, 6.

⁸¹ Mark Strand, "Paul Resika's New Paintings," in *Paul Resika: Paintings: Jack Island* (exh. cat., New York: Salander O'Reilly Galleries, 2007), n.p.

Interestingly, Resika sees in Hofmann's own abstract paintings a direct relationship to nature and the landscape. Resika lived and worked near a pond, in a wooded section of Wellfleet, on Cape Cod. As Resika stated:

I had no idea until many years later, when I moved into those woods, how many of Hofmann's paintings were inspired by the ponds of Truro and Wellfleet. I see it so clearly. It's almost like an interpretation of nature. He was a romantic expressionist about nature. It's not gritty New York painting. He always insisted on the primacy of French art, not because it was French but because it was the best.⁸²

This quotation is interesting not just for the idea it proposes, but because it provides a clear insight into Resika's own work, and his debt to Hofmann. It describes Resika's work and opinions just as much as it describes Hofmann's. Resika, too, is ever the romantic painter – perhaps a trace of his training with Sol Wilson. His work, too, is an “interpretation of nature” – it is not painted from life, but it is based in a feeling or vision of the scene. Resika's work as well, is more “French” than “gritty New York” in its debt to Romantic landscapists like Corot, and the abstracted color orchestrations and arabesques of Matisse. The fairly rigorous reduction of form to essential forms and volumes give Resika's work its structure; it is within these parameters that Resika establishes spatial organization. However, by laying down this structure he is free to be the romantic and the expressionist as well – to suggest the flow of water with a trace of curving brushstroke, the richness of sunset by layering an orange-yellow sky against purple buildings, the isolation of a tiny red boat against an inky blue-black sea.

⁸² Resika, interview by Dickey, 19-20.

Section V of the *Painter's Primer* / Education and Work of Louisa Matthiasdottir

The fifth section of Hofmann's *Painter's Primer*, "The Picture Plane," contains a discussion of his most widely quoted dictum, "push-and-pull." Here, Hofmann outlined his ideas about the nature and importance of the picture plane in relation to composing a picture. He expressed his idea, again, that the medium of painting – the two dimensional flatness of the support, with its specific size and boundaries – is primary in defining and limiting the composition. He re-stated his premise that appearance and the picture plane are similar, in that they are both two-dimensional, saying "this is of basic meaning for the creative process." He continued:

We do not see objects in themselves but their appearance. However, with the aid of our spatial sense, we interpret appearance as three-dimensional reality. Our spatial sense is based on our projective capacity and this on our vision. Vision and projection lead to the optical experience. In the same way the nature of the picture plane is available to us only through projection. We interpret the properties of the picture plane by means of our capacity for projection.⁸³

This word that Hofmann uses here, "projection," frequently appears in his text, and is used to explain the artist's active role in both seeing and translating nature into art. The artist is not an observer or a recorder of reality, but rather, undertakes a complicated process of understanding, interpreting, and filtering nature to construct the painting.

Hofmann considered that "the untouched picture plane is in perfect two-dimensional balance." By working on this surface, the artist creates a spatial illusion. Each mark on the surface is a "division" of the picture plane, and "the act of dividing the picture plane is the basis for the enlivenment of the form."

A close reading of Hofmann's own explanation of "push and pull" seems to differ somewhat from the popular understanding of this concept. While push-and-pull is

⁸³ Hofmann, *Painter's Primer*.

frequently described simply as the interaction of two planes on the canvas, Hofmann outlined an inherent mechanics of the picture plane itself. He spoke of the picture plane itself reacting with “push” and “pull” to the stimulus received. As he wrote, “to understand the inner workings of push and pull it must be recognized that, by nature, the picture plane automatically reacts in the opposite direction to the stimulus received.” To explain this phenomenon, he used the metaphor of a balloon, which, if pressed on one side, will swell out on the other side in relation to the pressure applied. It is, therefore, up to the artist to exploit this process. As Hofmann wrote, “Form can be developed in proportion to the stimulus received.” The artist, by making a mark, divides the plane, and begins to create a spatial impression. The picture plane “reacts,” and the artist must counteract, to preserve the inherent two-dimensionality of the picture plane, and the state of balance. It is, again, a matter of creating three-dimensionality without destroying the two dimensionality of appearance and the picture plane.

Hofmann wrote, “the function of push and pull in respect to form discloses the secret of Michelangelo’s monumentality and Rembrandt’s universality. At the end of his life and at the height of his capacity Cézanne understood push and pull as color’s greatest indwelling secret.”⁸⁴

Hofmann outlined the method of creating depth through overlapping. He showed how overlapping planes, seen from a particular vantage point, can create a “climbing” or “falling” movement into or out of depth, in a diagram like, “The Phenomenon of Overlapping” (fig. 1.6). Resika called this type of diagram “the first lesson” in that it was Hofmann’s most primary way of demonstrating how simple overlapping of abstract

⁸⁴ Ibid.

planes can create the sensation of depth. It was the kind of basic lesson that Resika believes should be taught to burgeoning artists from childhood, but which is usually not.

Louisa Matthiasdottir was the most reticent of the painters discussed here, and the most she has said about Hofmann is “he wasn’t a fool, like so many people who try to teach without knowing anything.”⁸⁵

Matthiasdottir was born and raised in Reykjavik, Iceland. She was exposed to contemporary Icelandic artists through her cultured family, had studied design in Copenhagen in 1936-37, and in Paris with Marcel Gromaire at a small private art school in the Maison Watteau, in 1938. By 1939, when she returned to Reykjavik, Matthiasdottir was painting remarkably unique and assured work, characterized by monumental figures that occupy the whole painting space, composed of broad color planes executed with a wide, rough stroke. She was already a quite sophisticated painter by the time she entered Hofmann’s school in 1942.

In one of the very few extensive statements on her work, Matthiasdottir stated:

The reason I paint is because I want to paint what I see. But to paint what I see I must build from color. I try to paint what I see. I don’t do shapes and colors without seeing them in nature. Either it looks like a landscape or it doesn’t. That’s all. And also, either a form fits in a painting or it doesn’t. After all, a painting isn’t really a still life or a landscape, it’s a mere canvas. It can never be real life. It has to be a painting.⁸⁶

Matthiasdottir’s statement is deceptively simple. It is the kind of dialectical reasoning we find in Hofmann. She paints what she sees, but her means are foremost, form and color.

It must look like the landscape, but the painting is just a canvas. These kinds of

⁸⁵ Matthiasdottir, in conversation with Adelsteinn Ingolfsson, quoted in Ingolfsson, “A Solid and Serene World: The Art of Louisa Matthiasdottir,” *Iceland Review* 3, vol. 23 (1984), 24.

⁸⁶ Louisa Matthiasdottir, Statement in *Art of the Real: Nine American Figurative Painters*, by Mark Strand (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1983).

statements – though stripped of Hofmann’s intellectual ornament, echo his beliefs. His “push-and-pull” is more than just a description of planes tugging in opposite directions of the surface. It is a dialectical formulation of picture-making in which the artist becomes an active participant by understanding the mechanisms of picture plane and utilizing to the highest degree possible the means at his or her disposal. Push-and-pull, in the dialectical sense, is also about the process of “projection” of oneself into the natural appearance of things – the simultaneous experience of seeing the “appearance” – the flat planes, but knowing and experiencing their depth.

Matthiasdottir’s work is about this quest. In her mature work, like her portraits of family members, still lifes and landscapes, she achieved a piercing portrayal of the subject with a sparing, broad touch. In Matthiasdottir’s work, “projection” implies her total comprehension of the essence of the subject – whether it be the sheep roaming through Icelandic countryside, an eggplant set atop a table, her daughter or herself. She worked in broad strokes – things become elemental forms, pure color. This underscores her interest in and understanding of the flat picture plane. But ultimately her work is also about space – each object, each facet of the landscape holding its own, definitive, sturdy ground. In her still lifes, like *Still Life with Bottle*, 1984 (fig. 1.7), the elements are definitively separate: a jug, two tomatoes, an eggplant, and a glass occupy their own space surrounded by a white tablecloth. Two zucchini and a knife set on a cutting board are in the center. The deliberate positioning of each element against an abstracted white ground of walls and tablecloth commands our attention. Although each object is depicted in “flat” broad strokes, Matthiasdottir does not lose their volumetric qualities. It is reminiscent of the following directive in this section of the *Painter’s Primer*:

If surfaces do not represent a firmly grounded system of relationships they are open to an ambiguous interpretation. The most complicated surface has only a vertical and a horizontal axis. In a system of relationships vertical axes are opposed to other vertical axes, horizontal axes in opposition to other horizontal axes. If the inner structure of the volume is ignored, the volume becomes, in its outlines, a plane.⁸⁷

Matthiasdottir's painting is about the interaction of each element, but also the alone-ness and individuality of each. The system of relationships is literally "firmly grounded": Matthiasdottir makes us very conscious of the weightiness of each object, and the passage of "vertical and horizontal axes" along the picture plane. Although in this painting she used a still life, her insistence on these verticals and horizontals could be compared to the "grid" of a Mondrian. The eggplant is as upright as the purple-hued bottle; and the tomatoes echo the roundness of the short glass, yet also remain vertical. This is all emphasized by the vertical fold in the tablecloth and the lines of the wall behind. The central triangular format of zucchini and knife set on a cutting board break up this insistent horizontal-vertical quality, but simultaneously anchor the composition and give it strength. This triangular composition also suggests perspectival lines that might direct our eye back into infinite space, but space is somehow stopped by the tomato at the rear of the table, and the white wall behind that emphasizes the limits of this picture and inherent limitations of the picture plane. Although this description may seem technical, Matthiasdottir's process and painting, in its "grounded system of relationships" had an inherent poetics: she invested each object with a psychological, evocative weight and meaning such as that which Hofmann suggested when he said push and pull was the secret of Rembrandt's "universality." By removing detail and getting at the essence of

⁸⁷ Hofmann, *Painter's Primer*.

the object, Matthiasdottir “projected” herself into the creative process – hers was a personal vision of everyday objects.

However, the issue of “projection” seems even more relevant to Matthiasdottir’s approach to portraits and self portraits in which, with the most pared-down means, she achieved an essential vision of the subject – their attitude, position, posture, energy. In the 1960s Matthiasdottir painted a series of small portrait heads of her daughter Temma that command the kind of attention of a much larger work, in their intense, dramatic pull. One of these, *Head of Temma*, c. 1962 (fig. 1.8), shows the adolescent girl looking down with her head in her hands. Her position and the monumentality of her head in profile, hair, chin, and features have the weightiness discussed above, but this also comes from the psychological underpinning of the picture. The subtext is of course the intensity of the mental life of an adolescent and the mother-daughter relationship at this time. But Matthiasdottir did not dwell on details or in fact provide the viewer with any extraneous information – the head occupies the entire frame and is set against a neutral-colored background that matches the neutral tones of the head. Space is compressed, so that the background, especially the triangle between Temma’s forearm and her profile becomes its own equally important form. This spatial compression and the attention to the shape, color, and tone of the “negative space” relates to Hofmann’s term push-and-pull in that it restores the two-dimensional balance of the picture plane. But the compression of space also underscores how the artist saw and projected herself into the moment – the flat “picture” of her daughter’s head, resting in her hand, deeply musing – is everything, a whole world.

In Matthiasdottir's landscapes, like *Self Portrait in Landscape*, 1991 (fig. 1.9), space is deeper: this world encompasses the artist, sheep grazing in Icelandic fields, sea, mountains and sky. Yet Matthiasdottir interlocked each shape and plane here, too, so that foreground and background become one composition, inextricably bound. Each landscape element is painted as its own brightly hued and nearly unmodulated color plane, fitting in and echoing what is above and below. Sheep become elemental forms in black and white; Matthiasdottir's form is geometricized but still naturalistic; the horizontal stripe detailing on her blouse echoing the horizontal planes of the landscape, but she, like nature, is emphatically upright, firmly grounded.

Section VI of the Painter's Primer / Education and Work of Albert Kresch

Hofmann began the section, "Pictorial Realization of the Visual Experience" with a brief discussion of the effects of small movements of form in a picture, and then moved on to introduce issues of light and color. He evaluated the effects of shifting one plane (the middle ground) within a composition. Hofmann maintained that slight movements of planes, which may cause only slight differences in the two-dimensional organization, can have an enormous effect in terms of the expression of depth or three-dimensionality: "The difference of a fraction of a millimeter can often assume a meaning of infinity."⁸⁸ These shifts change what Hofmann termed "tension relations" among the planes and within the picture as a whole. Tensions are one of the most important forces in picture-making for Hofmann, who called them the "life-giving elements in the picture." Tensions come from movement, and rhythm is the tension in the picture as a whole.

⁸⁸ Hofmann, *Painter's Primer*.

For Hofmann, light and color are tools in creating space and movement: he called them “movement properties of space.” He stated that, optically, we are most concerned with light in terms of its effect on objects. However, artistically, light has a larger and more general function - it affects the entire pictorial experience. It can absorb and eliminate details. It can reveal new surfaces and forms. It can merge forms with one another. Ultimately it can help emphasize what is important, and eliminate what is unnecessary. (Such ideas are reminiscent of Impressionist theory, although Hofmann in fact called the last idea “a fundamental of abstract art,” and linked it to Le Corbusier’s statement, “Art, in order to be called abstract ... must be concrete.”)

Hofmann also differentiated the pictorial from the visual experience of color and light when he noted succinctly, “In nature light makes for color. In painting color makes light.” This issue is particularly relevant to Kresch and Resika, who exploit the ability to create light through the use of color in their landscape paintings. Hofmann also quoted Picasso, who spoke in a letter to a friend of “Painters who make of the sun a yellow spot and of painters who make of a yellow spot the sun.”

Bringing the discussion of light and color back to the introductory ideas, Hofmann discussed color “intervals” and tensions. Hofmann defined color intervals as contrasts within the color scale that can express tensions. Using musical analogy, and betraying his spiritual bent (typical of German modernist theorists), Hofmann discussed the existence of color chords and harmonies, saying that color intervals “undergo supersensory alliances and express transcendental effects as do the tones in the intervals of music.” He differentiated between color “contrasts” and color “intervals,” stating that contrasts “separate” while intervals “bind. In other words, Hofmann was writing about

how color can be used to create rhythm in a picture through the exploitation of “color intervals.” This is diametrically opposed to what Hofmann in class disparagingly referred to as “tonal painting” in which the artist relies on tonal variation to create space and depth. Hofmann believed that color can express a specific tension that can not be replaced by any other combination. On the other hand, a tone is not specific – it “can be produced by a hundred different colors.”

Hofmann outlined what he considered the many virtues and powers of color. He said that color can create a “light unity within a painting,” color has character, it expands and contracts form, it divides and binds form. It can produce form, space and mood. It has volume, intensity, and expression. It can have a three-dimensional effect. Bringing us back to that most primary issue, Hofmann insisted that color should not sit flat on the surface – he called this “decorative,” as opposed to functioning as a volume and contributing to the expression of depth. Hofmann insisted that color is indispensable in producing tensions, and producing the spiritual elements of form. Though color development emerges form.

The paintings of Albert Kresch in many ways seem the apotheosis of Hofmann’s theory; within their small formats, a few deeply saturated color planes press up against one another to create a landscape. Still, Kresch insists he rarely thought about Hofmann’s ideas after his studies, and maintains that he is interested in color values and painters like Corot and Courbet, whom Hofmann did not care for.

Kresch, who was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania, but lived in New York from the age of nine, became interested in Hofmann when he was just sixteen years old, after reading a compelling article on the painter by Clement Greenberg in *The Partisan*

Review. A few years later he was taking free summer WPA art classes at the Brooklyn Museum, and a few classmates planned to study with Hofmann in the fall. Kresch, who was attending Brooklyn College, joined them for night classes in 1942. He remained at Hofmann's until 1943, when he joined the Air Corps. In the evening sessions, students did not paint, they only drew – as Kresch recalls, they always used the same material – charcoal and kneaded eraser on 18 x 24-inch paper. Kresch, like Resika, would occupy the coveted monitor position.

Of Hofmann's theory, Kresch said, "Hofmann's ideas seemed based on Cubism, but I think he changed it, brought it up to date. He put a little bit of Mondrian in, even at that time. I also think that very deep in Hofmann – one of his first loves – was Kandinsky's work during the period 1913-16."⁸⁹ He recalls a reproduction that remained posted at the Hofmann school from the early days until the very end, Cézanne's *Boy with a Red Waistcoat*, 1889-90 (fig. 1.10), feeling it demonstrated many of Hofmann's ideas. He explained, "I can see why Hofmann liked it. See the space between the arms – how large it is. And the strong diagonals of the curtain and table. There is a marvelous force in the angle of the body. The face is a mile from the shoulder."⁹⁰ In other words, Cézanne harvested the power of "negative space": the space between the features and parts of the body become strength-giving planes in their own right. At the Hofmann school, Kresch said, "[Students] were concerned with space. We even called ourselves the "space cadets." He feels that the 18 x 24-inch paper was "wonderful for drawing the

⁸⁹ Kresch, interview by author, tape recording, 30 May 2007, New York.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

figure. The figure could just sit on the sheet, and then you could play with the planes. It seemed so comfortable.”⁹¹ Kresch recalled:

When I was at the Hofmann school, the word “plasticity” was used very often. Later it was not used so much. But the question is, what did it mean? Did it mean the same thing to everyone? To me, it meant freedom. ... Plasticity or freedom is something that is still part of my work. I am always trying to make sure I’m not getting tight.⁹²

However, Kresch differentiated his own work, saying that he is more interested in “catapulting color and form off the surface” than he is in Hofmann’s idea of “push-and-pull.” In addition, he thinks mostly about value contrast. Kresch said, “Hofmann never talked about values. Corot was put down as a bad guy. But Corot is very important to me. I’m interested in a few color planes creating space.”⁹³ Furthermore, Kresch stated:

I think that the color should have weight to it, should have a *pressure*. It isn’t the tint or the hue that counts so much, it’s that pressure. That’s why if a painting doesn’t have a good amount of contrast, something’s wrong. It starts getting bland, boring and so on. But the two painters in my life who meant more to me than Hofmann were Arp and Mondrian. It’s all about their treatment of edge and where colors meet in their paintings, and the importance of the horizontal and the vertical. It’s the color around it, and it’s *this* edge around *that* color that does the work....Because of value contrast, I can use practically any color in a landscape or a still life if I get the value right. If I get the tonality and the contrast right, then I can *invent* the color – lets say it’s green against blue. I could make one somewhat orange-ish and the other somewhat purple-ish, but I have to get the right value of purple and of orange.⁹⁴

In the statement above, Kresch advocated the possibility of using non-local color, which Hofmann believed in as well. The only distinction is that Hofmann believed certain colors had inherent meanings, and in combination can produce specific tensions that can not be replaced by other colors.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Albert Kresch, quoted in “Hot and Cool, Freedom and Structure: Albert Kresch in Conversation with Deborah Garwood and Chris Taylor,” by Deborah Garwood and Chris Taylor, *Artercritical.com*, March 2005.

Kresch also differentiated himself from Hofmann when he stated:

I am interested in an orchestration of light. These things about planes impede light. They lessen the unity of the painting. Hofmann's was a very analytic idea. What I'm interested in is a sum, a holistic thing. In Hofmann's concept, you have a color plane here, a color plane there, so that the viewer can feel the space. I think space doesn't need to be fractured in that way.

Although Kresch was correct that creation of pictorial space was Hofmann's major concern, Hofmann was perhaps more interested in the "holistic" sum than Kresch assumed. In this section of the *Painter's Primer*, Hofmann discussed the process of "binding" color and creating "alliances" through the use of color intervals, as opposed to color "contrasts" which merely separate. He had also expressed the importance of light in absorbing and eliminating details, and merging forms together.

Both Kresch and Hofmann drew upon musical analogy to discuss the process of art-making. Kresch has, since the 1940s, been an intense jazz enthusiast, and this has informed his work deeply. (In this he was influenced by and related to Mondrian; this aesthetic relationship will be discussed in the following chapter). Hofmann used musical terminology to discuss the concepts of "intervals" and "rhythm." Jazz music was the backdrop for get-togethers and outings of Kresch, Bell, and Blaine. Music, considered in German aesthetic theory to be the most abstract of the arts, provided an example of the possibilities for abstraction, and for specific practices like the use of non-local color, and emphasis on form rather than content. Kresch frequently uses jazz terminology to explain his work, its structure, and his aesthetic impulses.

Although Kresch, like Hofmann, has used nature as the starting point for his work, he completes some of his paintings in the studio, and does not rigidly adhere to reality. This process may free him from minutia and extraneous detail, allowing him to

achieve the broad sweeps of color and form that characterize his landscapes. Kresch's most recent paintings are particularly virtuosic in their ability to capture the essence of a scene and its light through the most minimal means. The assimilation of art and life has been a lifelong quest for Kresch, and this dialectical quest, too, is at the heart of Hofmann's theory. Kresch stated:

Since I've been painting a long time, I remember a statement that Braque made: "With age, art and life come together." When I was younger, I didn't quite understand it, but more recently I can see what he meant. When I wake in the morning, out of the window I see the buildings, I observe the trees. At certain points in my life when I was younger, I couldn't figure out what to do with my observations. There would be a struggle, a warfare with the painting. But more recently, when I look outside I know almost immediately the rhythms, how the colors are going to work, and what I have to do to start the painting. I think of "Hot" and "Cool" as in jazz - here meaning "Emotion" and "Formal", where 'formal' is equivalent to structure. Another way to put it is "Free" and "Formal". My artistic life has been a search for a seamless resolution, or synthesis, of the paradox in painting between structure and freedom.⁹⁵

Kresch's statement is reminiscent of a comment that Hofmann made at the end of his life, explaining that he no longer needed to work from specific referents, because, "I bring the landscape home in me."⁹⁶

Perhaps the most relevant connection between Kresch and Hofmann is the resultant force and energy that emerges from their work as a result of deeply saturated color, flow, and confident, instinctual execution. Kresch achieves this even though he works in very small-format pictures. For example, in his painting, *Red House*, 2000 (fig. 1.11), which is only 3 x 9 inches, red and pale yellow collide against a sky comprised of a melody of blues, causing light and energy to resonate off the surface in a swath that seems to exceed way beyond its small scale. When Kresch was pressed to admit any

⁹⁵ Kresch, *Artcritical.com*, March 2005.

⁹⁶ Hofmann, in "Hans Hofmann: 1880-1966," *Newsweek* 67 (February 28, 1966), 85.

lingering connection to Hofmann, he allowed, “Yes, I agree [with Hofmann] that the painting should have a sense of force. Like Picasso said, ‘One must get the clash of the big cymbal.’”⁹⁷

Section VII of the *Painter’s Primer* / Education and Work of Nell Blaine

Although Hofmann had introduced some of these issues in the previous section, the seventh section of the *Painter’s Primer* was officially dedicated to a discussion of light and color. He began by defining and differentiating between three terms that will be used throughout his discussion: texture (which he defines rather abstractly as “a characteristic quality of things”), pigment (“color body), and *factura* (“color application”).⁹⁸ He also differentiated between two types of natural light: that which comes directly from a light source and produces light and shadow on the object; and that which penetrates matter and re-reflects as local color. Hofmann stated that the “body weight” of a color can influence the sensation of a form emerging or receding. Color weights also contribute in the realization of color intervals. Failure to paint with the proper color weight will result in a failure to realize a significant interval relation. (Color intervals were defined in the last section as contrasts within the color scale that can express tensions.) For example, if a color is too heavy, it will “fall out of the picture plane.” If it is too light, it “gives the impression of a vacuum – it no longer participates in expression.”

⁹⁷ Kresch, interview by author, 30 May 2007.

⁹⁸ Hofmann used the term, *factura*, which is most commonly associated with Russian Constructivism. However, he uses it in a different way than the Constructivists, defining it as “color application.” The Constructivists used the term to denote the complete realization of the inherent properties of a material, and the manifestation of these properties in the completed artwork. See Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

The painter must also be conscious of the number of color bodies on a surface. Too many and the plane becomes too heavy. Too few, and the plane is too light. The correct number is individual and cannot be calculated; it can only be sensed by, again, always working to balance out the intervals within a composition.

Factura—or the surface, and quality of color application—is also important, because Hofmann believed it expresses pictorial movement. Contrasts in color application can create the perception of light moving in space. This can greatly intensify the entire pictorial effect. But, Hofmann cautions, *factura* can not overwhelm the character of a plane. The “meaning” must be straightforward, and a “light unity” must be achieved. If light unity is not present, the plane will disintegrate into a multiplicity of spots. In other words, Hofmann was stating that variation of color application is important to create movement, but this variation must be meaningful and not overabundant, or else the picture will cease to be unified. Hofmann reminded the artist that an interest in *factura* is hardly new; although it was common to see contemporary artists mixing wood, mirrors, metal or paper into pigment, the old masters also embellished paintings with gold and precious stone. Hofmann attributed this to an awareness on their part that *factura* had the capacity to “enrich light.”

Hofmann believed that colors have inherent meanings and symbolism: for example, blue symbolizes eternity while green is associated with fertility. He granted that it is the artist who has the ultimate ability to achieve the “mystic realm of color” through “poetic interpretation” and “psychological penetration” of connections and associations in color meaning.

He concluded with a summation stating that the value of colors expressed in form is dependent on five issues: their spatial placement within the composition; the degree of saturation; their relationship with other colors in the painting; on the relative brilliance and saturation as compared to the other colors in the painting; and their psychological meaning.

Nell Blaine, who studied with Hofmann in 1942-43, stated:

My true subject is the life of forms as revealed by light. Light reveals or conceals as it moves. Even colors in close values can give a feeling of light saturation. Light can be mysterious or it can dazzle. I want a free use of color to give me equivalents of these sensations. I have no desire to copy shadows or light patches, although they give me clues and directions and help me structure space. I pick and choose even while I empathize, becoming what is before me and surrounds me.⁹⁹

Blaine's statement, made many years after her Hofmann days, contains several ideas that relate to Hofmann's theory. She declared that her "true subject" is form – and more specifically the "life of forms," as opposed to a literal subject like the landscape or still life. She aimed for a "free use of color" as opposed to naturalistic or local color. She wanted to represent nature, but not in a literal manner, rather, through "equivalents of sensations." She did not want to copy nature, but rather, use it to "structure space." She even used Hofmann's word "emphathize" to describe her process – her own projection into nature and reflection into her own work.

Blaine grew up in Richmond, Virginia, and was raised by parents she has described as puritanical. She suffered an unhappy childhood: she was born with vision problems and other children made fun of her appearance: cross-eyed, thin and pale, with thick eyeglasses. She was raised against the backdrop of the Depression; her father lost a

⁹⁹ Blaine, interview by Martica Sawin, in Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life*, 102.

job, worked below his potential, and had a violent temper. Her mother was extremely religious, provincial, and a compulsive cleaner. They lived in a plain house in the suburbs. Blaine rebelled – acting wildly, climbing on rooftops and out of windows, and fighting with boys. The brightest experiences of her childhood were visits to relatives – a farm in the backwoods of Virginia, her grandfather’s cabin on the shore, and the Baltimore home of her aunt and uncle, who encouraged her to visit museums and libraries.

When she was two, her parents realized she was vision-impaired, and she was fit with eyeglasses. Blaine recalls suddenly being able to see the world around her: excitedly pointing out, “water, tree, house.” Blaine considers this moment of sudden visual stimulation may have played a part in her formation as an artist, and continual interest in the natural world. Blaine drew throughout her childhood, and at sixteen, enrolled in the School of Art of the Richmond Professional Institute. There she painted in a tight realist manner, although she also studied advertising, where “posters with big flat areas of color” gave her “an appreciation for the modern.”¹⁰⁰ After two years at RPI, Blaine left for a job in an advertising agency, and enrolled in an evening course taught by Worden Day, a painter who had studied with Vaclav Vytlačil, who in turn was a Hofmann student. Day had internalized many of Hofmann’s lessons through Vytlačil, and passed these on to Blaine, who was an eager audience. Day also transmitted an excitement about working directly from the landscape. In general, Day also represented for Blaine a more cosmopolitan, sophisticated mentality – sharing her own urban adventure stories, encouraging her to read Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, and, ultimately, urging her to move to New York to study with Hofmann. Blaine did so,

¹⁰⁰ Blaine, interview by Sawin, in Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life*, 17.

despite the severe protests of her mother, who truly believed the artist's life was sinful, and that her daughter was a traitor to leave the family.

Blaine was, from the beginning, “a true disciple” of Hofmann's: “I was absolutely cut out to be a disciple at that point. I was so excited because it was so totally unlike anything I had known before.” She found his teachings “dynamic and clear” and took it on herself “to interpret to some of the others... who were a little mystified by his language.”¹⁰¹

Blaine found Hofmann a “vivid man... a brilliant man... [who] operated on an intuitive level, as Matisse describes intuitive.” Although he used “an analytical way of demonstrating space,” there was “emotion and intuition and mystery.”

A lot of people felt that [Hofmann] was difficult to understand. But I thought they were approaching it too intellectually... Often people can't open themselves enough emotionally... They feel that they have to have everything spelled out in such simple terms, and verbalized, that it drains the sense out of it. He was more than just a verbalizer, because there was a language problem of course... Many of the words were different and even his gestures were articulations.¹⁰²

In a 1978 panel discussion about Hofmann, Blaine characterized Hofmann as an ongoing inspiration, stemming from what she called his involvement with the “organic in art, a very natural way of working that could be stimulated always.” She elaborated, “I feel that in a way the color feeling, and the liberation about color, came in a way through Hofmann – but at a much later date.”¹⁰³ Another student of Hofmann, Wolf Kahn, stated:

“[Hofmann] encouraged students to use their imaginative fantasy to regard color as an

¹⁰¹ Blaine, interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler, June 15, 1967, Transcript, Archives of American Art, New York, 4, 5.

¹⁰² Blaine, interview by Anne Skillion, 1979, transcript, Oral History Collection, Columbia University, New York, 32.

¹⁰³ Blaine, *Hans Hofmann: Students Talk about Hofmann as Teacher*. Panel discussion given as part of the Artists Talk on Art Panel Series, Educational Alliance, New York, 17 April 1978, Transcript. Artists Talk on Art Archive, New York.

independent entity, which I still do.”¹⁰⁴ It is to this that Blaine seems to refer, when she mentions the “liberation about color.”

Ultimately it seems that Hofmann’s example allowed Blaine to forge a synthesis between her obvious delight in the visual experience, and her understanding of pictorial principles. Her work translated the phenomena and the movement of natural light and color into pictorial equivalents that stand for, but do not replicate nature. Blaine considered that a pivotal shift in her work followed her 1950 trip to Paris. In the years following her study with Hofmann, she moved into hard-edged, geometric abstraction, which gave way to paintings with figural elements executed in a manner close to Fernand Léger and Jean Hélion. However, in Paris, she allowed herself to work directly from nature, and it was after this trip that she began to synthesize nature and the pictorial:

After I came back from Paris I went through a difficult transitional period. I didn’t meet my own standards anymore. Now I was sticking my neck out, and the work didn’t look as confident. But there was no turning back. I had to go that way. Gradually I became interested in natural light translated into pictorial light; since then it’s been all of a piece.¹⁰⁵

It is true that Blaine’s 1940s work was strong and confident; a painting like *Open and Enclosed*, 1945 (fig. 1.12) seems like mature work, rather than that of a twenty-three-year old. Blaine was recognized by her peers, critics, and dealers for this work. In 1944, she became the youngest member of American Abstract Artists. In 1945, Peggy Guggenheim included her in an exhibition of women artists, thanks to the recommendation of Clement Greenberg, who had singled out her work among the Jane Street Group. Howard Putzel, who owned the 67 Gallery, apparently called her “the

¹⁰⁴ Wolf Kahn, in “In Conversation: Wolf Kahn with David Kapp and Robert Berlind,” by Robert Berlind and David Kapp, *Brooklyn Rail*, May 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Blaine, interview by Sawin, in Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life*, 42.

hope of American painting” in 1945 and planned to give her a show the next season (this never occurred, due to his sudden death that same year).¹⁰⁶

Despite this attention, nature was a compelling force. Her hard-edged abstractions are dominated by primary colors and blacks, whites, and grays. These gave way to the more acid-toned Léger-like compositions, with mustard yellows and olive greens. Her color in this early period feels systematically imposed rather than nature-led.

As Blaine noted of her transition during the Paris trip:

I found myself noticing movements, proportions again. Before, I’d been trying to impose my abstract canon onto nature, almost like a device: taking the weight of the Léger line, for instance, or organizing what I saw in terms of an abstract structure. But when I got to France it was like opening a window. Suddenly a lot of sunlight came in. So I decided to let myself go and become a kind of hedonist, to enjoy painting again, loose painting, even too loose. When I sat by the Seine and drew, I had the feeling that I was doing what I was meant to do.¹⁰⁷

We can see the “sunlight” come back into Blaine’s color gradually during the 1950s, in paintings like *Autumn Studio I*, 1957 (fig. 1.13); by 1968, a painting such as *Interior at Quaker Hill II* (fig. 1.14) seems to take light as its true subject – to borrow Blaine’s own phrase. Blaine works with color like a musician, in the sense that each painting is composed in its own “key” – a range of colors that bounce around the picture plane in harmony.

Blaine communicated a sense of nature without using local color. Rather, she worked to get at the sensations and changes of nature by translating these effects into pictorial qualities. It is to this that she likely referred when she spoke of an “organic” way of working. A response process to nature informs the process: the touch, the form and the color orchestration. The key for Blaine – and this stemmed from Hofmann – was

¹⁰⁶ Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life*, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Blaine, interview by Sawin, in Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life*, 40.

an understanding of the “limitations” of the picture plane and its inherent differences from reality.

Section VIII of the *Painter's Primer* / Education and Work of Robert De Niro

The final section of Hofmann's *Painter's Primer* summarized some major points of the text as a whole, but with a twist: the recognition that there is no one “key,” no formulaic theory to art-making. This is because form is always tied to the subjective experience – personal projection, illusion, the spiritual, the individual artistic experience. Hofmann's is not the subconscious world of the Surrealists, though: he believed in a fully *conscious* projection of personal feeling and sensation.

Hofmann started the section with a “presupposition” – that form is always dependent on various factors: the static, the dynamic, the subjective, and the metaphysical. The “static” refers to their very being and their expressive means, while “dynamic” refers to the enlivenment of their being. By “subjective,” Hofmann allowed for the artist's nature and the projection of his temperament and capacity for empathy; the “metaphysical” factor is linked to spiritual relationships inherent in form.

Hofmann organized the rest of the section by outlining several “laws” inherent to form. “Form I” delineates the differences between reality (natural appearance) and a resulting work of art. He suggested many processes that intercede during the process of art-making. Nature is experienced personally and through individual intuition and sensory experience; it is translated into the artist's individual expressive means (which become “a world in itself”) for the viewer; and the experience of nature is brought into harmony with pictorial feeling. This results in what Hofmann terms a “supra-real” (in

contrast to “reality”). Hofmann’s was a dialectical understanding of art-making in which reality, plus personal expression, becomes supra-reality.

In “Form II: Pictorial Means: Graphic Means of Expression,” Hofmann repeated some of his technical beliefs – the arrangement of volumes around a center, and the importance of a relational system of planes and geometric forms. The pictorial element of the line, previously unmentioned, is included in this discussion. Hofmann stated that the line can characterize both the object and space around it; therefore it carries rhythm and can both separate and bind form and space. Ultimately Hofmann’s main purpose in this section becomes apparent in his statement, “Form is based upon spiritual perception of the living and rhythmic connection of things and upon the rhythmic enlivenment of expressive means in the sense of pictorial unity.” He continued, “The more we respect the nature of the picture, the more surely nature develops in the picture.” With these two statements he was suggesting a more complicated (but no less direct) relationship between nature and the artwork. Rather than the goal being a faithful, illusion of nature, he suggested that the artwork echo and represent nature by using its expressive (formal) means to stand for the feelings in nature.

“Form III: The Artistic Experience as Prerequisite for Composition” continued along these ideas, with Hofmann emphasizing that “the worth of the work lies not in what is narrated, but in the spirituality in which it pictorially transmits its message.”¹⁰⁸ Hofmann demanded that the artist be aware of and utilize his personal feelings and sensations, as well as his artistic / expressive means. He stressed that the artist’s “unconscious” is not enough. Rather, he said that “the difference between children’s art and great art products is that the former is purely unconscious and emotional, the latter

¹⁰⁸ Hofmann, *Painter’s Primer*.

emotionally heightened by highest consciousness. The “great artist” achieves a “spiritual mastery of experiences” and is able to effectively translate this into art.

In “Form VIb: Rhythm,” Hofmann continued to express how the artist’s temperament, feeling, and understanding of spatial experience all come together to create a unified, whole. He wrote, “Rhythm is life. Rhythm is the expression of the highest movement. Rhythm is spiritually all-encompassing. Rhythm therefore conditions maximum spatial effect.” He said that rhythm creates “spatial balance by leveling all forces participating in the formative process.” In this fully realized, unified artwork, Hofmann stated, “everything should be self-evident.” Hofmann said that for the viewer, “the basis of aesthetic enjoyment is “the impression of living and spiritual movement of form awakened in him. . . . The art work pictorializes an experience-unity, as which it is no longer subject to analysis.”¹⁰⁹ These statements come together to form some of Hofmann’s key beliefs. The artwork is the sum product of the artist’s individual experience of nature; it should demonstrate full command of the artist’s means (understanding of pictorial principles of space and movement and form); and it should evoke a living, moving, and spiritual sense of the world in the viewer – with no extra information needed. Hofmann’s was a tall order – and one that is radical in today’s context, in which contemporary art demands that viewers approach armed with a surfeit of additional knowledge.

Robert De Niro, who studied with Hofmann in 1939 and 1941-42, said of his teacher, “He didn’t have too much of a formula. I remember him very clearly as saying, “Anyone who breaks the rules can do a great painting.’ After you got the compositional

¹⁰⁹ Hofmann, *Painter’s Primer*.

basis, then your instincts came in and you forgot all that.”¹¹⁰ This “qualifier” seems the essence of Hofmann’s final section of the *Painter’s Primer*. Although he has laid down a dense and lengthy set of theories, there are no definitive rules, everything can be contradicted and synthesized, and ultimately, intuition and personal vision is at the heart of any great artwork. As Martica Sawin has noted, De Niro would later echo this type of thinking in his own teaching; his curriculum description from the New School read:

The student works from the human figure and still life seeing them as a relationship of planes and volumes related to one another and to the picture plane.... The advanced student is taught to use his knowledge of structure and color... to express his feelings, both esthetic and human....¹¹¹

Empathy, intuition, and a romantic vision were essential aspects of De Niro’s work. De Niro was considered a brilliant student at Hofmann’s school, where he met fellow student Virginia Admiral, whom he married in 1942. The couple became close friends of Hofmann. When their child, also named Robert De Niro (now the well-known actor and director), was born, the couple asked Hofmann to be his godfather. De Niro seemed to enact that love-hate / adulation -rebellion dichotomy with Hofmann, however, which is typical of some intense student-teacher relationships.

De Niro was raised in Syracuse, New York by an Irish mother and Italian father, and attended his first art classes at the age of thirteen at the Syracuse Art Museum, children’s classes offered under the auspices of the Federal Art Project. His teachers were sufficiently impressed with him that they invited him into adult classes, and ultimately provided a room at the museum where he could work independently. Several

¹¹⁰ Robert De Niro, interview by Tina Dickey, 18 October 1992, transcript, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

¹¹¹ Martica Sawin, *Robert De Niro, His Art and Life*, 1994, 85. Typescript of unpublished monograph, copy in author’s files, courtesy of Sawin.

years later, in 1939, they also encouraged him to apply to Black Mountain College, where he was awarded a full scholarship. In the summer before this academic term began, however, De Niro went to Provincetown to study with Hofmann. De Niro enjoyed his time there, and the freedom of working independently from models in the morning and still life in the afternoon. When the summer ended, however, and De Niro arrived at Black Mountain, he found a completely different atmosphere, where his teacher Josef Albers was more rigid and regimented, giving his students specific problems to solve. As De Niro stated:

Albers was a terrible teacher, except he had great integrity. I'm sure you could not have paid him anything to move one line in the painting to the right or to the left, or change a red to green. And yet he based a lot of his teaching on color theories. He measured color, like one ounce alizarin crimson and one ounce ultramarine blue. He had no instinct for the relations of color. I don't think he had any feeling for form. It's just an arbitrary arrangement which is the result of a lot of theories. He called my work too emotional and compared it to Modigliani and Grünewald.¹¹²

De Niro left Black Mountain College after a year and a half, to return to Hofmann's school, this time in New York. From the beginning, therefore, flexibility and an ability to recognize the feeling and instinctual nature of art-making was important to him.

Most of De Niro's early work was destroyed in a 1951 studio fire, or deteriorated from a combination of frequent moves, and cheap paint layered over old paintings. One painting survives from 1942-43, which has been exhibited and reproduced, *Venice at Night* (fig. 1.15). It is based on a line from a Cocteau poem, "Venice by day is a country fair shooting gallery in crumbs. By night it is a negress in love, dead in her bath with her jewels of paste." De Niro depicted the woman in her bath, with the line from the poem written across the upper and lower portion of the canvas. De Niro has described the

¹¹² De Niro, interview by Dickey, 18 October 1992.

painting as “somewhat languid in manner, a reaction to the cubist paintings I had been doing at the Hofmann School a short time before.” Although the artist was already rebelling from Hofmann’s principles in the sense that the subject matter and treatment was literary (not from nature), and his execution was more fluid than planar, De Niro may have been inspired by two sources close to Hofmann, according to Sawin. Fritz Bultman, a former Hofmann student, had written on the wall of his room in the Hofmann house in Provincetown “Upon what wall am I inscribed so deeply that the light of day cannot reach me?” And Lee Krasner, another former Hofmann student, had written on her studio wall a line from Rimbaud’s *Season in Hell*, “To what beast must I hire myself out?”¹¹³ Furthermore, his use in this painting of unmodulated, saturated color, laid on thickly, was not anathema to Hofmann. Unmentioned by De Niro or other scholars is the relationship to Gauguin in the use of non-local, primary color, and writing as part of the composition, as in Gauguin’s *Manao Tupapau* and his last major work, *Where do we come from, Who are we, Where are we going?* De Niro’s painting, done when the artist was only twenty years old, in fact established many tendencies in De Niro’s work that would persist throughout his career – pure, rich color, the arabesque, an abstracted, generalized treatment of the female figure, and an interest in French culture and the symbolist literary movement.

De Niro’s *oeuvre* is in fact remarkably of a piece: he found his voice early, and by the 1950s he was already utilizing the combination of flowing, painterly dark line to define high-chroma forms that would remain his signature. De Niro worked with a series of consistent subjects and motifs, including the still life, the female figure or figure groups, some themes borrowed from the masters, and the crucifixion. The very

¹¹³ Sawin, *Robert De Niro: His Art and Life*, 25.

cohesiveness of De Niro's painterly language suggests many of the issues Hofmann raises in the final section of the *Painter's Primer*, where he reminds us of the artist's personal experience of nature, and the "world" of the individual artist's expressive means.

De Niro, at one point, wrote that after seeing Van Gogh's painting *L'Arlésienne* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), he asked himself "if there had been anything painted that was better."¹¹⁴ During an interview on Hofmann, De Niro stated, "Hofmann was the last teacher who was interested in painting as painting, not as a product. Painting as an expression." In the same interview he characterized art as "an exploration of the human soul."¹¹⁵ De Niro's painting explored the soul without painstaking attention to things like facial expression or environmental details. In his work, facial features are generalized or even non-existent, figures are pressed to the surface without specificity of background or space. In this, De Niro followed the French symbolist tradition of Van Gogh and Gauguin, who used painterly means as opposed to realism to communicate deep expression (thus De Niro's respect for a painting like *L'Arlésienne* which penetrates its subject through symbolist [formal] means, as opposed to realism). This also, of course, is related to the lessons of Hofmann, particularly those expressed in the final section of the *Painter's Primer*: it is not attention to or transposition of objective reality that results in a "supra-reality"; rather it is the painter's command of his subconscious, his personal vision, and his ability to communicate through painterly means.

De Niro was born into a Catholic family, and although he abandoned Catholic practice, the subject of the crucifixion commanded attention in De Niro's work from

¹¹⁴ Robert De Niro, "Two Artists View Van Gogh," *Art/World* 9 (11 December 1984 – 11 January 1985), 1,9.

¹¹⁵ De Niro, interview by Dickey, 18 October 1992.

1955 well into the 1980s. Like the French poets Verlaine and Baudelaire that he admired, De Niro seemed drawn back to Catholicism as he aged. De Niro also explored different beliefs: with Kresch, he attended lectures by Krishnamurti, and the son of psychic Edgar Cayce. Towards the end of his life, De Niro studied Christian Science. His interest in the spiritual, although non-sectarian, is also akin to Hofmann's spiritual leanings.

In speaking of Hofmann, De Niro repeatedly stressed that there was no "formula," contrary to some public opinion. He recalled attending Hofmann's lectures:

I don't remember the questions that half the people were asking at the lectures, because I think they were silly, so many of them wanted the "formula." They thought Hofmann had a formula and if they learned it, they could become a great painter finally.¹¹⁶

Of the school, De Niro stated similarly:

Everybody was dedicated to him. Some people were too cultish about it. They felt they had found the answer. Like, you know, before Hofmann came along they used to have a "Golden Triangle," and now Hofmann students thought Cubism was the key to painting. If you understood Cubism, you had solved the compositional problem. Hofmann did understand it, so therefore you were going to learn to paint these paintings. [But] some of those people probably didn't ever use their instincts and are still trying to work according to some formula, which isn't what Hofmann had in mind.¹¹⁷

Hofmann's students would by no means have perceived him as a mystic; however, elements of spirituality and metaphysics are quite apparent in his writings. Hofmann believed that color combinations and contrasts, and the arrangement of forms were capable of producing psychological and mystic effects. Like many other artists and thinkers of his time, he was interested in the concept of a fourth dimension. He

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Robert De Niro, interview by Tina Dickey, transcript, 14 April 1991, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

considered that creativity was a force of cosmic energy, and he seemed to link science, phenomenology, creativity, and metaphysics. He believed in the personal vision of the artist, the magic of art-making, and the cosmic will to create. These aspects of Hofmann were a critical part of how De Niro understood him, and they informed his work, choice of subject matter, and approach to painting.

Conclusion

Hofmann's *Painter's Primer* is an indispensable tool to understanding the work of the seven artists discussed here, as well as the theoretical underpinning of the New York art world of the time. A consensus exists as to Hofmann's importance as a teacher; however, his text and theories may have remained little-discussed and unpublished because the words seem to pale in comparison to the dynamism and charisma of his real presence. However, it is only through close textual analysis that we can achieve a true understanding of his lessons and their place in history, their connection to the past, especially his German theorist predecessors, as well as his legacy in New York painting.

The painterly representational artists were primarily motivated by formal issues, as opposed to content, socio-political ideology, or popular culture (although this is not to say their paintings are devoid of any meaning in these terms). However, issues like spatial organization, rhythm, force, and color were their primary tools-in-trade. This connects them to a long lineage of practitioners. Their attachment to formal rather than cultural issues goes a long way to explain how they would end up written out of art history in the long term. A movement like Pop Art, which became the successor to Abstract Expressionism and swept the painterly figurative artists aside, can be explained

in sociological, cultural, or literary terms. These more prevailing art historical methodologies make less sense when applied to the artists discussed here.

During the time of their studies with Hofmann, most of these painters were working abstractly. However, as we can see through analysis of the *Painter's Primer*, Hofmann's ideas apply equally well to figurative work. In his dialectical construct, abstraction was not an end-game strategy; neither was the painting's "flatness." Hofmann's synthesis of nature / abstraction and two-dimensionality / three-dimensionality comes out of German modernist theory, but was translated by Greenberg into something much more rigid. Hofmann's students, although many "rebelled," were generally ultimately able to take what they wanted from him and forge their own individual paths. Oftentimes, though, an end-game strategy is easier to write about and codify than a synthetic approach, which may also explain these artists' lack of widespread recognition. The following chapter will address how these artists began to reconcile their training in the tools of abstraction with a burgeoning (or returning) interest in representation. Hofmann, by presenting them with a rigorous but ultimately flexible set of ideas, opened the door to a multiplicity of approaches.

CHAPTER TWO: RECONCILING ABSTRACTION AND FIGURATION

Preface: The Artists and the Scene

Hans Hofmann had opened a door, and his most talented students were perfectly poised to stake their claims in the New York art world of the mid-1940s. When they began to exhibit, they were met with an encouraging critical reception. Clement Greenberg was an early advocate of several of these painters. Of an exhibition of the Jane Street group, which included Nell Blaine and Albert Kresch, Greenberg wrote, “they are all ambitious and serious, and seem uncompromisingly determined to prolong and widen the path marked out by Matisse, the Cubists, Arp, and Mondrian.”¹ Greenberg singled out Blaine’s painting, *Great White Creature*, in her first show with the American Abstract Artists Group, in 1945, calling it “the best in the show.”² Around 1947, Greenberg showed dealer Leo Castelli artists he was interested in – great artists he thought would emerge, and Castelli recounts that “one of them was de Kooning, and the other one was Paul Resika.”³ Of Robert De Niro, Greenberg wrote “the originality and force of his temperament demonstrate themselves under an iron control of the plastic elements such as is rarely seen in our time outside the painting of the oldest surviving

¹ Clement Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of the Jane Street Group and Rufino Tamayo,” *The Nation*, 8 March 1947.

² Clement Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Pollock; of the Annual Exhibition of the American Abstract Artists; and of the Exhibition European Artists in America,” *The Nation*, 7 April 1945.

³ Leo Castelli, interview by Paul Cummings, 14 May 1969, transcript, Archives of American Art, New York.

members of the School of Paris.”⁴ In 1947, Greenberg wrote on the exhibition *New Provincetown 47*, which included recent students of Hofmann such as Resika and Paul Georges, “how high the level is on which most of them paint, how firmly they wield their medium, and with what awareness of the true direction of all that is serious in modern art.... I doubt whether any other American group show this year will reach an equally high and consistent level.”⁵

These artists had also formed alliances with other New York avant-garde abstractionists. Mercedes Matter was an original member of the Abstract American Artists group, founded in 1936, and also the one original female member of The Eighth Street Club (known as The Club, founded in 1949.) In 1944, Blaine became the youngest member of the Abstract American Artists group. But by the end of the decade, these young painters were, perhaps unknowingly, moving away from the very trends that would make New York the center of the international art world. They were moving away from the avant-garde underground of abstraction, into increasingly representational painting.

Introduction

My goal in this chapter is to detail the transitional period between the artists’ early, abstract painting, and the newly representational work that followed. I will begin by establishing the state of the New York art world in the 1940s as it relates to the production and reception of abstraction. Next, I will examine the motivations behind the

⁴ Clement Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of Max Beckmann and Robert De Niro, *The Nation*, 18 May 1946.

⁵ Clement Greenberg, “Review of an Exhibition of Contemporary British Art and of the Exhibition *New Provincetown ’47*,” *The Nation*, 11 October 1947.

artists' shift into figuration and the actual artworks which mark the transition. Bell, Blaine, Kresch, and Matthiasdottir were all part of an early artists' cooperative, the Jane Street Gallery. Over the course of the gallery's existence, pure geometric abstraction gave way to painterly figuration. In the case of the Jane Street Group, the artists were greatly influenced by other artists and their theories: first Mondrian, then Jean Héliion (who provided a model for shifting from geometric abstraction to figuration), and also by one another. Therefore their shift can be described as the product of a group dynamic, catalyzed by prominent art world models. I will use Mondrian's and Héliion's writing to suggest the ways in which the artists were influenced, as well as comparing their theories to that of Hofmann. Ultimately the Jane Street artists were able to apply the principles of abstract painting to figuration, which allowed them a great range of expression and possibility. They moved from a "pure" idea of what art should be, into a greater sense of personal style. The Jane Street Group will be examined as a microcosm of the shift from abstraction to figuration, against which the other artists in this chapter will be discussed as counterpoints. For example, Resika's shift from abstraction to representation was a rebellion from his training with Hofmann. Feeling frustrated that Hofmann's teaching ignored the study of anatomy, Resika traveled to Italy, studying and imitating the artistic process of Venetian masters. Resika temporarily abandoned his modernist beginnings in favor of painting like a Baroque or Renaissance artist. Only later in his career was Resika able to more fully reconcile modernist abstract principles, with representational (landscape) sources. Matter always worked from life, although her early work is more abstract than her later work, in the sense that the early work stems, ideologically, from the Cubist theory inherited from her father, the painter Arthur B. Carles, and from

Hofmann. Her process and outlook shifted in the late 1940s as she became influenced by Giacometti and more devoted to perception and the creation of a “presence” within the picture. Matter was able to naturally reconcile the principles of abstraction and representation, perhaps because she grew up in a rich cultural background and throughout her life had a widespread exposure to many sectors of the art world. Through friendships with a diverse group of artists, Matter considered such categories to have fluid boundaries. In the case of Rosemarie Beck, abstraction was ultimately not enough. Beck wanted more expression, more complexity, and even more limitations. She was ultimately an intellectual—steeped in literature and music—and brought this varied human experience into a modernist conception of picture-making. She moved from what she termed a “closed” conception of the painting process, into a more “open” one.

Abstraction and the New York Art World of the mid-1940s

In the early 1940s Abstract Expressionist painting was germinating; by the mid-1940s the painters who would later become famous were already exhibiting and producing accomplished work. It took a while for the establishment to catch up, however. The established galleries were mainly showing European moderns and American realists in the 1940s. A few alternatives existed: Peggy Guggenheim’s museum, *Art of this Century*, gave exhibits to Baziotes, Gottlieb, Hofmann, Motherwell, Pollock and Rothko. Howard Putzel, who had worked for Peggy Guggenheim, opened his own space, the 67 Gallery, and in 1944 made the exhibition *40 American Moderns*, which included Avery, Davis, Gottlieb, Hofmann, Motherwell, Pollock and Rothko. In 1945, Putzel appealed to the public to invent a name for what he recognized was a new trend in painting with his

show, “A Problem for Critics,” which included Arp, Gorky, Gottlieb, Hofmann, Masson, Miró, Picasso, Pollock, and Rothko. By 1946-47, Abstract Expressionist painters were given show after show at three commercial galleries: Betty Parsons, Samuel Kootz, and Charles Egan. However, the major art magazines ignored the contemporary movement in New York. *Art News*, in these years, focused its coverage almost entirely on the work of older artists and museum shows. When Thomas Hess became the managing editor in January 1948, this began to change, although the Abstract Expressionists were still not the subject of feature articles until 1950; but thereafter, the magazine became the most sympathetic print venue for the New York School. Clement Greenberg was the most important spokesperson for the Abstract Expressionists in these years, writing for the *Nation* and the *Partisan Review*. 1948 brought the first monograph on an Abstract Expressionist painter: it was on the occasion of Hofmann’s exhibition at the Addison Gallery, *Search for the Real*, and included some of Hofmann’s own writing.⁶ The Club, a meeting place for most of the Abstract Expressionists, was founded in 1949, with Philip Pavia as treasurer and program organizer.

The art world that the “second generation” would inherit, therefore, was ripe for participation, and an awareness of Hofmann’s ideology served the artists well. Although the mainstream public was still ignorant of contemporary artistic developments, artists such as Resika, Blaine, and Matter were completely cognizant of the avant-garde, and to some extent, positioned themselves in these circles. The dealers quickly became aware of them, in return. Peggy Guggenheim showed Robert De Niro at her *Art of this Century Gallery* in a group show in 1945, and a solo show in 1946, and she showed Blaine’s work

⁶ Bartlett Hayes and Sara T. Weeks, eds., *The Search for the Real and Other Essays* (exh. cat., Andover, Mass: Addison Gallery of American Art, 1948; reprint, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).

in 1945. By the 1950s, De Niro was also showing regularly with Charles Egan, a dealer of Abstract Expressionism.

Hofmann was not the only abstractionist who taught this generation of painters. Peter Heinemann studied with Josef Albers at Black Mountain College in 1948-49. He never made completely abstract painting, although an early portrait bears the mark of Albers in its geometric formality, pared-down color scheme, and the inclusion of an abstract bright yellow plane floating in the middle of a slighter paler yellow ground. Leland Bell received informal mentoring with Karl Knaths at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., in the late 1930s. Rosemarie Beck was mentored by Philip Guston and Bradley Walker Tomlin in Woodstock, New York in the 1940s and studied in Robert Motherwell's Subjects of the Artists School.

Of their own accord, however, the abstraction practiced by these painters gave way by the close of the decade to more representational work. One wonders why this happened, when it seemed the future would be theirs if they followed on the coattails of the burgeoning Abstract Expressionist movement.

The Jane Street Group: From “Purity” to a Personal Style

Four of the artists discussed in this dissertation—Bell, Blaine, Kresch, and Matthiasdottir—were members of the earliest-known artists' cooperative gallery in New York, which opened in 1943 in a storefront at 35 Jane Street. In the seven years of the gallery's existence, it became a microcosm of the challenge to reconcile abstraction and representation. The work of several artists of the “Jane Street Group” — Bell, Blaine, Kresch, and Judith Rothschild (1921–1993) — gradually evolved, during the course of

these years, from a pure, precise abstract style to one which re-introduced naturalistic form. The artists were still quite young in these years, holding their first solo exhibitions at about age twenty-three or twenty-four. With this youth came a conflicting set of impulses — a natural desire to experiment stylistically, as well as a dogmatic sense of purpose about what art should be. The transition from abstraction to representation was a profound one for these artists. It involved their understanding that all painting is simultaneously both representational and abstract, and that the same guiding principles of compositional organization apply to both.

The Jane Street Gallery was begun by a different set of people from those who perpetuated it. Little is known about the gallery's first year. The founders of the cooperative were Hyde Solomon (1911-1982) and lesser-known artists Ken Ervin, Josiah Lancaster, Janet Marren, Howard Mitcham (1917-1996). At the time, Solomon was working in a studio downstairs from Blaine at 128 West 21st Street. In 1944, he invited Blaine, along with Kresch, both of whom had recently been studying at the Hofmann School of Art, to join the gallery. Blaine and Kresch were eventually joined also by Bell, Rothschild, Matthiasdottir, Ida Fischer (1883-1956), and Larry Rivers (1923-2002).

The “second wave” of Jane Street members came to dominate the gallery. They were ambitious and sure of their program. In these early years, Bell, Blaine, Kresch, Rothschild, and Fischer worked in an abstract style informed by Mondrian, Léger, Arp, and Héliou. Solomon, whose principle artistic mentor had been Meyer Schapiro, became the sole bridge between the two contingents, and he followed the second group into a more abstract style. Blaine explained, “Gradually we rather eased out some of the more realistic people and were very dogmatic about our program. Now, as I look back on it,

I'm a little ashamed. But we were so excited we really thought that was the gospel, you know. When you're young you are very sure of yourself."⁷

Bell's only art training was through informal mentoring. He was born in Cambridge, Maryland in 1922, but grew up in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn until high school, when his family moved to Washington, D.C. Even as a very young child he was interested in jazz and art. He made caricatures of passersby on King's Highway or classmates in his grade school. He went to the old Paramount Theater in New York to hear Benny Goodman, and the Savoy Ballroom to hear Chick Webb and Al Cooper. He also played the drums. During high school in Washington, D.C., he spent time at the Phillips Collection and was introduced to the Provincetown painter Karl Knaths, who regularly taught adult painting classes at the Phillips. In 1940, Bell followed Knaths to Provincetown. Bell explained:

I became a kind of disciple of Knaths, that is, I would listen to him in awe. He would talk about Swedenborg and Kierkegaard and would read from the writings of Mondrian and Klee, which he was translating. He gave me the feeling that art was noble and that it was something that had nothing to do with self-interest, rather with a disinterested passion.⁸

Bell recalled an experience in which he was copying work at the Phillips Collection, which became a defining moment in terms of codifying his artistic goals. He was drawing Thomas Eakins's portrait, *Miss Amelia Van Buren* (c. 1891), and after a while, the painting "began to seem confused. The folds didn't flow as part of the mass of the skirt. The more I worked on my drawing of it, the more I felt that the small articulations in the painting didn't have anything to do with the larger forms... It didn't exist in space." Near the Eakins was a Henri Rousseau painting and two paintings by

⁷ Nell Blaine, interview by Dorothy Gees Seckler, 15 June 1967, transcript, Archives of American Art, New York, 8.

⁸ Leland Bell, interview with Judy Cutler, 6 April 1981, transcript, personal archives of Judy Cutler.

Chaim Soutine. He found that, as opposed to the Eakins, these works had “what Gris calls ‘the flat-colored architecture of the planes.’ That’s what the Eakins was missing. Eakins really didn’t master the technique of painting.”⁹ What Bell was looking for – in art history and in his own painting – was a convincing structure, organization, unity, and spatial sense in the painting. He felt that every part of the painting should reinforce a central sense of structure, and so he objected to the inner folds in a skirt which did not reinforce the entirety of the form. A continued drive toward purity of form and organization would motivate Bell throughout his career.

Bell was particularly adamant about the superiority of abstraction, and acted as a kind of proselytizer for it with his friends. Blaine described the evening she met Bell, when Kresch brought him to her studio:

That was the rocky beginning of a friendship that was to last forty-nine years — rocky because Lee [Bell] tore into my work, which must have seemed like an innocently imitative version of Matisse. He stated positively that Mondrian, Arp, and Magnelli were the best and that Mondrian was the greatest. Lee had even knocked on Mondrian’s door and visited him. He was an artist who really stuck his neck out, lived on nothing, and went through hell to achieve. Lee’s hostility to my work came as a shock. But his lecturing me about the art he liked or didn’t like made a strong impact.¹⁰

Bell even defended abstraction to Jackson Pollock, who, at the time, was working on his more representational paintings such as *She-Wolf*.¹¹ Bell had taken a job as a guard at Hilla von Rebay’s Museum of Non-Objective Painting (which eventually became the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum). Pollock, who was also working there making frames, had told Bell that he could never paint if he admired Arp and Klee,

⁹ Leland Bell, interview by Nicholas Fox Weber, in Weber, *Leland Bell* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1986), 34.

¹⁰ Nell Blaine, interview by Martica Sawin, in Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life*, 20.

¹¹ Weber, 39.

causing Bell to argue the case for abstraction. Around the same time a Mondrian show was being held at Valentine Dudensing Gallery. Bell apparently told a visitor looking at the work of Rolph Scarlett in the Non-Objective Museum. “That’s not painting. You want to see real painting, go to the Mondrian show at the Valentine Dudensing Gallery.”¹² He was overheard, and fired from his job. Bell was so impressed by the Mondrian show, however, that he personally visited the artist on four occasions, discussing jazz as well as painting.

Bell later also met and befriended Héliion. In 1944 he responded to an ad for a superintendent’s job in a building on Hudson Street. He looked at the list of tenants in the building, and saw Jean Héliion’s name among them. He accepted the job, which came with a first floor apartment. He first met Héliion when he was summoned to repair something. Bell immediately started talking about Héliion’s paintings, and Héliion thought, “Boy, they really have some kind of *concièrges* in America.”¹³ Bell later wrote:

In 1940 I had a passion for abstract art; at that time it appeared to me as the only true and possible path... I used to haunt the Gallatin Collection on Washington Square. ... but it was uptown at the old Valentine Gallery and later at Peggy Guggenheim’s “Art of This Century” that I saw Héliion abstractions from the later ‘thirties. These paintings had an ordered and absolute character to their structure similar to the work of other abstract artists I admired. But whereas Arp and Mondrian, to take the two who perhaps impressed me the most, constructed with relatively simple and neutral units, Héliion tended towards the complex and eccentric.¹⁴

Bell’s dogmatic sense of purpose about abstraction was contagious. As Blaine recalled:

[By 1944], I’m developing so fast in my tastes and I become more abstract all the time—to the point of great purification—and by this time I’m kind of influenced by my friend Leland Bell and his taste. He’s very tough-

¹² Bell, interview by Weber, in Weber, 39.

¹³ Jean Héliion, as quoted by Leland Bell, interview by Weber, in Weber, 43.

¹⁴ Leland Bell, “Héliion Paints the Impossible.” *Art News* 63 (November 1964): 36-37.

mindful and very austere about his ideas, and I'm very enchanted by his intellectual probing, and he seemed like the tough-minded person around, more than Hofmann at this point.¹⁵

The years of the Jane Street Gallery became a time of rebellion from their powerful teacher, Hofmann. For Blaine, this took the form of working in a precise, non-painterly style, which was a more programmatic and less intuitive approach than that which Hofmann taught. Blaine's painting, *Red and Black*, 1945 (fig. 2.1), is comprised of geometric and biomorphic shapes that float against a primed canvas. The shapes, unmodulated planes of red, black, and gray, feel like puzzle pieces that, if we could move them around slightly, would mesh and fit together. An abstraction of Kresch's from this period (fig. 2.2) is executed in a similar vocabulary although it plays with color and tone differently. Against a light blue ground sit outlined rectangular forms of umber, mustard yellow, dark blue and green. Kresch created space by orchestrating the overlapping and interaction of these solid, different colored forms, while Blaine's shapes danced and flitted independently through their space. Bell's abstract paintings also utilize unmodulated forms and dark outlining, although they too have a unique character. In *Abstraction (I)*, 1942-45 (fig. 2.3), blue, yellow and black curving forms with hollowed areas weave over and against one another. The biomorphic forms are suggestive, but the more relevant issue is the play of strong color contrasts and the flow and rhythm of shapes punctuated by black areas and interrupted by line. This work bears some distinct resemblances to that of Stuart Davis. The Jane Street artists were certainly aware of Davis's work and admired it deeply; Kresch considered he was the best American abstract artist of the time and considered studying with him at the New School.

¹⁵ Nell Blaine, interview by Anne Skillion, 15 March 1979, transcript, Columbia University Oral History Office, New York, 46.

However, Kresch was more interested in how Mondrian and Héliou created space through abstract, geometric means, as opposed to what he saw as an emphasis on flat patterning in Davis's work. He was also simply attracted to the international, French artists as opposed to the American one.¹⁶

It is useful to consider the theory of Mondrian in relation to these artists' path to geometric abstraction. Kresch had actually enrolled in Hofmann's school because of his interest in Mondrian. A sculpture teacher in college had studied at the Bauhaus and encouraged Kresch to look at the Mondrians exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art. Kresch felt that Hofmann's teaching would be the closest thing he could find to Mondrian in New York.

Mondrian, like Hofmann, looked to the essential "vocabulary" of art for its expression: the form, planes, color and line. He rejected the "tendency toward description"—in other words, a reliance on content to express meaning—advocating instead what he termed "plastic expression."¹⁷ Like Hofmann, Mondrian believed in pure, un-modulated color, and the capacity for the arrangement of planes to create space, as opposed to perspectival or tonal rendering of form. He went further than Hofmann, however, in pressing for the complete negation of naturalism, stating it "veils direct plastic expression of the universal."¹⁸ Mondrian eventually believed in using only the straight line and primary color because they could express a pure and objective expression of relationships. He considered the paring down of artistic means to represent

¹⁶ Albert Kresch, in conversation with author, 8 February 2010.

¹⁷ Piet Mondrian, "Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence," (1920), in Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James, eds. and trans., *The New Art-The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1986), 136-137.

¹⁸ Piet Mondrian, "The Manifestation of Neo-Plasticism in Music and the Italian Futurists' Bruiteurs," (1921), in Holtzman and James, 150.

the culmination of a long progression from individual expression to a revolutionary, universal form of expression. Subjectivity would only be expressed through the composition. The artist should work with universal means (straight line and primary color) but could create a specific and individual work through his or her organization and placement of these components. Based on this, Mondrian wrote that what he termed “the new plastic” is “dualistic through its composition. Through its exact plastic expression of cosmic relationship it is a direct expression of the universal; through its rhythm, through its material reality, it is an expression of the subjective, of the individual.”¹⁹ Mondrian emphasized the dualistic nature of art-making because balance and opposition is central to his theory at large. Essential to his theory, for example, is the perpendicular arrangement of line and plane. Although such ideas resemble those of Hofmann—the dualistic or dialectical constructions, the balancing of universal and subjective—Hofmann was more nuanced, less rigid, in his ideas. Hofmann strongly emphasized personal expression as opposed to the universal. He did not limit or pare down the means available to the artist. Mondrian was like a philosopher, and he has in fact been widely positioned in terms of Platonic thought, as well as that of Kant and Hegel. Mondrian’s texts called for a utopian revolution in art-making; whereas Hofmann wrote the “primer” for the practitioner.

For Mondrian, jazz offered the same possibilities he advocated in neo-plastic painting. He recognized in jazz the elimination of descriptive melody, as well as the introduction of opposing dualities of rhythm, melody, and dance (unlike older forms of music in which music, melody, and the dancing couple would harmonize), and the

¹⁹ Piet Mondrian, “The New Plastic in Painting,” (1917), in Holtzman and James, 31.

inclusion of “dry, unfamiliar, strange noises that oppose rounded sound.”²⁰ These qualities echo those he wrote about in painting: the elimination of subject matter and naturalism, the oppositions of perpendicular lines, the complete use of primary color, and straight line. As Mondrian wrote:

True Boogie-Woogie I conceive as homogeneous in intention with mine in painting: destruction of melody, which is the equivalent of destruction in natural appearance, and construction through the continuous opposition of pure means – dynamic rhythm.²¹

Jazz was central to the Jane Street group – and they had this interest in common with Mondrian as well. Bell was a jazz drummer, and he taught Blaine to play the drums. He urged her to listen over and over to the records of Lester Young, Count Basie, Chu Berry, and Coleman Hawkins.²² Informal get-togethers at Blaine’s house centered around music. According to Kresch:

Nell had her loft on 21st Street divided in half — half was her studio and half her living space. She liked to work until late at night, until four or five in the morning. Around nine or ten o’clock, her doors were open, while she was working, and people would come in. All the latest records, the record player, and her drums were there, and there were painters and musicians coming in. The room would fill up. Every once in a while she’d come in from her studio and bang on her drums.²³

During this period, Blaine met her husband, Bob Bass, a French horn player. It was through Bass that Blaine met the musicians Larry Rivers and Jack Freilicher, whose wife was the painter Jane Freilicher. They became close friends, and at Blaine’s suggestion, Larry Rivers and Jane Freilicher began their careers as painters by studying with Hofmann in 1947. The Jane Street group organized and sponsored a jam session at

²⁰ Piet Mondrian, “Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence,” (1920), in Holtzman and James, 144.

²¹ Piet Mondrian, “An Interview with Mondrian,” (1943), in Holtzman and James, 357.

²² Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life*, 22.

²³ Albert Kresch, interview by author, tape recording, 22 April 2002, New York.

the Village Vanguard on a Sunday afternoon in June 1945, as a fund-raiser for the gallery. According to Kresch, it was around the time of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker's first concert at Town Hall, and he and Blaine went to Town Hall to distribute leaflets for their jam session. Blaine even personally invited Charlie Parker, one of their musical heroes. As Blaine has stated:

It was mixed up together, jazz and painting, Lester Young and Mondrian, Jo Jones and Arp, of equal value, bolstered by passionate talk and backed up by long record sessions which included titles like "Lester Leaps," "Ham 'n Eggs," "Tickle-Toe," and many other Lester-Basie recordings — often played eight to ten times at a sitting. Lee used paintbrushes as drumsticks or often just his hands, and after a while the music made sense to me, and I relaxed and got with the swing, which was the word used then for the movement in music. Swing also meant the music was really alive and vital, had quality. Because of Lee I began to play the drums, and I think handling the drumsticks affected to this day the way I use paintbrushes.²⁴

The Jane Street members engaged in other creative ventures. In May 1945, they presented the American premiere of a Federico García Lorca play, *If Five Years Pass*, at the Provincetown Playhouse, for which they designed the sets. Concurrently, they exhibited Lorca's paintings, drawings, and manuscripts at the gallery. The scene at the Jane Street Gallery was lively. It often remained open late into the evenings. One reporter observed that the gallery "was pretty well filled up now – young men with their collars open, long-haired girls in flat heels, a couple of smartly dressed middle-aged woman, and two or three soldiers and sailors."²⁵ Another reporter depicted the scene as "youthful bohemia in a ground-floor store, where artists, writers, and thinkers get together; do plays, show their paintings."²⁶ During the course of the seven years, the Jane

²⁴ Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life*, 22.

²⁵ Holly Beye, "Sherry and Art Down on Jane Street," *PM* (November 25, 1945).

²⁶ *Magazine Go*, Fall 1945.

Street group changed locations twice, moving in March 1948 to 41 Perry Street, and in September 1948, to 760 Madison Avenue. Their exhibition spaces were spare but always well-designed. Thomas Hess recalled the gallery as a “beautiful room.”²⁷ The announcement cards were often original color silkscreens or woodcuts with modernist typography (see fig. 2.4).

For the Jane Street members, as jazz lovers, the concept of “rhythm” in art (Hofmann called it “the highest quality in a work”) had profound resonance. Mondrian had also advocated for “rhythm” in art in his 1926 text, “Principles of Neo-Plasticism.”²⁸ In 1934, Hélión published an article entitled “Poussin, Seurat, and Double Rhythm,” which fascinated Kresch.²⁹ In this essay, Hélión heralded Poussin and Seurat for the use of both an internal rhythm (of individual elements within the composition), and an external rhythm (of the entire picture at large). He found in Poussin a total unity of composition in which each form is purposeful, including negative space, and contributes to the meaning and expressive potential of the whole. Using Poussin’s *Eliezer and Rebecca*, 1640s (fig. 2.5), as his primary visual example, he noted the complex use of dozens of circular forms, from the “garland” formation of the figure group, a spherical form on top of a pilaster, several vases, some with curved handles, the undulating poses of bodies, to the ellipses formed by arm gestures. Hélión considered that all these arm gestures “work together” as they both echo and counteract one another: they “describe the surface” and “indicate a circulation for the spectator’s gaze.” Oppositions dance across the picture: horizontal roofs balanced by a sloping one, a big sky space countered

²⁷ Thomas B. Hess, “Ida Fischer: relief-mosaics and oils,” Exhibition brochure, Hansa Gallery, 1955.

²⁸ See Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1957), 166.

²⁹ Jean Hélión, “Poussin, Seurat, and Double Rhythm,” (Paris, December 1934), in *Axis* 6 (Summer 1936): 9-17, and in Myfanwy Evans, ed., *The Painter’s Object* (London: Gerald Howe Ltd., 1937), 94-107.

by the small black space of a fountain. Throughout this, Héliion found that color, light and tone, work in a parallel process: colors oppose and echo one another; tonal gradation carries the eye in an elliptical path. Héliion believed no painter who followed Poussin had the same unity of rhythm – until Seurat. Héliion wrote that in Seurat:

... [The] rhythm is double. One aspect of the rhythm is strung on the general gesture of the picture and of all parts of it. The other aspect runs entirely through each individual part and completes it.³⁰

Héliion associated “double rhythm” with the idea that individual elements in a picture can be both “closed” (an internalized abstract rhythm), but also “opened” to the picture at large (the overall rhythm of the painting), and even to the world. In fact, Héliion used this essay to literally open the door to a possibility of figuration after abstraction. He advocated looking to nature, as opposed to reductively eliminating nature. He wrote “To go far in his work, the painter has to go everywhere at once, as nature does.” And he continued, “The least figurative painter cannot go far without getting a permanent lesson from nature,” qualifying this statement only by writing, “The chief point is to work within the meaning of nature instead of its appearance.”³¹

Héliion had begun his career as a painter after apprenticing in an architect’s office. Sent to the Louvre on an architectural mission, he discovered Poussin. Profoundly moved by the work, he decided to become a painter. Héliion was mentored by the Belgian painter Luc Lafnet, before meeting the Uruguayan painter Joaquin Torres-Garcia in 1926. Torres-Garcia temporarily moved in with Héliion while waiting for a studio to become available, and introduced him to cubism and surrealism. Héliion began to apply the lessons of synthetic cubism to his work of 1926-29. In 1928 the two artists exhibited

³⁰ Héliion, “Poussin, Seurat, and Double Rhythm,” in Evans, 101.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

together at the Marck Gallery in a show entitled *5 refusés* (five painters rejected from the Salon d'Automne). Through this show, they met Theo van Doesburg, and the discovery of neo-plasticism profoundly affected both painters. Ultimately, though, it was Héliion, as opposed to Torres-Garcia, who would join with Van Doesburg, as well as Otto Carlsson and Leon Tutundjian, to found the Art Concret group. Art Concret's manifesto was an attack against surrealism, and opposed to romanticism and expressionism. It read:

The work of art must be entirely conceived and formed by the mind before its execution. It must take nothing from the formal elements of nature, from sensuality or sentiment. We want to exclude lyricism, drama and symbolism.³²

Van Doesburg and the Art Concret group advocated that art should express universal values through abstract, mathematical order. Héliion was the editor of the magazine *Art Concret* published by the group, and became hugely influential on an international basis in promoting this painting. In 1931 Héliion was also involved in the founding of the Abstraction-Création group with Arp, Gleizes, Kupka, and Van Doesburg, among others. Through this group Héliion came into contact with an international range of abstract painters. He showed his own work in the United States, advised the collector Albert E. Gallatin, who owned the Gallery of Living Art, and encouraged the formation of similar abstract artist groups in Britain and New York. In Paris Héliion associated with Americans including Alexander Calder, John Ferren, John Graham, and the architect Frederick Kiesler. He took on the role of disseminating avant-garde ideas to these artists. He urged the Americans, particularly Harry Holtzman to set up an organization, which eventually came into fruition as American Abstract Artists in 1936.

³² *Art Concret* 1, Paris, April 1930, 1. Eng. trans., Trista Selous, in Didier Ottinger, "Héliion: The Art of Declaring," in *Jean Héliion*. Exh. cat. (London: Paul Holberton, 2004).

The Jane Street Gallery, its ideals and cooperative spirit, parallels such artist groups and was formed very much in the context of them. It is in the work of certain members of the American Abstract Artists group, such as George L.K. Morris, that one can find a strong rapport with the work of the Jane Street artists. A close link existed as well between the Parisian and the American abstractionists. Statements from the Jane Street artists' earliest exhibitions evidence the artists' association with abstraction movements such as Purism and Neoplasticism. On the announcement card for her 1945-46 exhibition, Rothschild published an Arp quotation, stating: "(I) do not wish to copy nature. (I) ... do not wish to reproduce but to produce ... these works are constructed with lines, surfaces, shapes and color." Similarly, an article on the gallery published in the leftist newspaper, *PM*, quoted the artists, stating:

'This is concrete art,' Nell corrected us, 'not abstract. It's concrete as a leaf.' 'It should stand by itself,' said Judith. 'Art should be an anonymous whole. I can't even sign my pictures anymore,' continued Nell.³³

The term "concrete" here is a direct reference to the abstract artists' group *Art Concret*, and George L.K. Morris's term for his own work: "concretions."

Much space is devoted here to the discussion of Héliou, because he was a tremendously influential figure for the Jane Street Group, and affected the direction their careers took in these years. The geometric abstraction they produced was based in the theoretical ideas of neoplasticism, as propagated by artist-writers Mondrian, Van Doesburg, and Héliou, whose artwork and writings they studied in depth. As former Hofmann students, the idea that they could use elemental lines to achieve space in the picture made tremendous sense. Kresch has described one of the appeals of Mondrian for

³³ Holly Beye, "Sherry and Art Down on Jane Street," *PM* (November 25, 1945).

him. “I discovered flash points at the merge of horizontal and vertical lines in the painting, which flicker. This makes the painting come alive. Economy doesn’t usually make for excitement, so you have to get it any way you can.”³⁴ Blaine has written similarly:

In [Mondrian’s painting] *Boogie-Woogie* even the physical being of the spectator is powerfully touched ... the eye responds in physical reflexes to the vibrating color transitions. Even the casual observer – perhaps someone even in mental disagreement with what he feels is the cold intellectual discipline and reserve in the approach of Mondrian, is subject to physical and emotional tensions.³⁵

Although Bell, especially, and by association Blaine and Rothschild, believed in these years in the value of “universal,” “pure” expression, the context of these ideas was not the same as it was for pre-World War I artists. The earliest abstractionists such as Mondrian and Kandinsky worked amidst an artistic culture of utopian ideals, and believed, literally, in the capacity of art to change the world. Their theories of a universal painting language were born out of such principles. Héliou, as well, was an inheritor rather than an originator of this theory. It was perhaps more difficult to ultimately adhere to an entire career of neo-plastic painting outside of such a context.

At the time Héliou wrote “Poussin, Seurat, and Double Rhythm,” in 1934, he was already becoming disillusioned with the rigid constraints of painting under Van Doesburg’s example. Following the death of Van Doesburg in 1931, Héliou’s contact with Arp and Calder had led him to allow curving shapes into his paintings and to use more complex colors (see fig. 2.6). Although Héliou was active in the Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (AEAR), he gradually distanced himself from activism, finding that politics ultimately interfered with art-making. A tour of the

³⁴ Albert Kresch, in conversation with the author, 27 September 2007.

³⁵ Nell Blaine, “Mondrian and ‘The New Spirit,’” 1944 (?). Archives, estate of Nell Blaine.

U.S.S.R. in 1931 left Héliion even more disillusioned with the capacity of artists to affect political change.³⁶

Ultimately, though, Héliion abandoned neo-plasticism because he found it too limited, the possibilities for expression too reduced. In an essay entitled “From Reduction to Growth,” he wrote:

[Total abstraction] offers certitude, order, clarity, but also extreme limitation. As soon as an opposition, such as a curve against a straight line is used, a certain evocation of object is produced, and the generality is lost. As soon as color quits the elemental points of the spectrum, however small the displacement, an evocation of light, that is to say a certain representation of a part of the world, is begun; unavoidably. The only totally abstract position is that of Mondrian, orthogonal opposition of lines, relation of rectangles, tensions of elementary colors. Everything else is forbidden. However perfect and beautiful the works of the master of this attitude, however large his mind and his comprehension, the position is that of reduction of possibilities.³⁷

This essay pressed for the expansion of possibility, depicting and critiquing the artist who works strategically within a closely defined mode:

Artists look at once for a cul-de-sac wherein to build themselves a throne. In fact, the most technically perfected works, the most achieved works are now produced in the cul-de-sac position. When he reduces his preoccupation of development, the artist can gather all his efforts around his object. He feeds it as a definitive animal, serves it. He does not look out any more. He hammers it, adjusts it, polishes it. By insisting, by making his approach subtle, he brings up to its surface a certain representation of his own complexes and qualities. He enriches it. Thus the work becomes admirable, different, a case, a type. And thus loses all its qualities of fight, its indications of possible progressions.³⁸

Ultimately Héliion called for the art work to be “considered an organism in growth... where everything remains possible...” He demands, “As much as possible got

³⁶ Didier Ottinger, “Helion: The Art of Declaring.” In *Jean Héliion*, 2004, 19.

³⁷ Jean Héliion, “From Reduction to Growth,” *Axis 2* (April 1935): 21-22.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

out of the canvas, as well as out of the artists. More instead of less. Developing and concentrating, at the same time.”³⁹

In February 1947, Clement Greenberg noticed a similar phenomenon among the Jane Street Group. He called the Jane Street artists part of “the more ambitious and serious of the youngest generation of American painters,” but he added “one provisional criticism” – “that they have perhaps too narrow and too sectarian a conception of what being an artist involves.”⁴⁰ Greenberg’s criticism was apt; the artists themselves came to realize that their abstract program was ultimately holding them back from full personal expression. Blaine, whose abstract work seems so unequivocal, admitted that during her years with Hofmann “there was a summer in the middle when I went to the country and just freely worked from nature in a way I never had before. That was quite a difference. But when I went back I carried on with the very abstract and became purer and purer.”⁴¹ In 1950, it was again a profound connection to nature that pushed Blaine further from abstraction. She described a trip to Paris:

I was just so taken with the visual look of the city. It was the first beautiful city I had seen. And nature took over. I realized that I had been depriving myself of some wonderful sensuous pleasure with painting and I just kind of let go. My painting changed completely in Paris.⁴²

Similarly, in the summer of 1948, Kresch and Solomon hitchhiked to Cape Cod, and stopped to work in the landscape.

In explaining the gradual transition from abstraction to figuration, Kresch stated, “What broke the ice was Hélión’s exhibition at the Rosenberg Gallery, and a general

³⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁰ Clement Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of the Jane Street Group and Rufino Tamayo,” *The Nation*, 8 March 1947. This exhibition, a group show of the Jane Street Group, was held at *Galerie Neuf*. The Jane Street group had lost their space at 35 Jane Street and were, at this point, without permanent headquarters.

⁴¹ Blaine, interview by Seckler, 6.

⁴² Blaine, interview by Seckler, 14.

feeling that pure abstract painting was not enough for us.”⁴³ During the war, Héliion was held in a Nazi prisoner of war camp, from which he managed to escape. He wrote about this experience in his book, *They Shall Not Have Me*.⁴⁴ Following his wartime experience, Héliion became fully committed to paintings representing human and city life. His shift was a gradual process that began with feelings of the rigorous limitations of neo-plasticism which manifested itself as the introduction of curved, biomorphic forms and complex colors. Next, Héliion began (covertly) making figure drawings of his wife, Jean Blair, while working in Rockbridge Baths, Virginia in the late 1930s. By 1939, Héliion had developed three figurative painting series: tightly framed heads, more descriptive still life paintings, and monumental, schematic figure paintings (see fig. 2.7).

His break from abstraction, which he had so vigorously championed, was a catalyst for the Jane Street artists following suit. The Jane Street artists all came to know Héliion personally, since Bell was his neighbor. As Blaine remembers, “[Héliion] would show his paintings very freely to younger painters. He had kind of open house on Saturdays and he would just tirelessly bring out paintings and let you look at them. Extremely nice.”⁴⁵ Blaine describes the role of Héliion as an influential exemplar of the transition from abstraction to representation:

Héliion was a key figure in all of this... He was himself a pioneer in the neoplastic movement, and he was the first major artist who, I believe, in Europe too, changed from abstract to figurative, but on a deep level. I mean there are people who can jump from one style to the other, and I am not talking about a superficial change, but a deep, soul-searching change, and he was extremely articulate in writing and speaking about it.⁴⁶

⁴³ Albert Kresch, interview by author, 22 April 2002.

⁴⁴ Jean Héliion, *They Shall Not Have Me: The Capture, Forced Labor, and Escape of a French Prisoner of War* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1943).

⁴⁵ Blaine, interview by Seckler, 15.

⁴⁶ Blaine, interview by Skillion, 70.

Even Bell, the adamant proselytizer for abstraction, was affected by Héliion's example. Héliion's ideas, such as those expressed in "Poussin, Seurat and Double Rhythm," echo throughout Bell's entire *oeuvre*. Héliion had noted the way figural gestures can create a rhythmic painting. Bell would consistently use this same technique—echoing and balancing figural gesture—in his own *Figure Group* paintings, which he made from the late 1970s until his death in 1991. In his painting, *Figure Group with Bird*, 1991 (fig. 2.8), arm gesture plays a prominent role, defining the triangulated space, accentuating a vertical line, directing our gaze to the center of the composition and to a bird perched on the table. The drama inherent in the gestures of the figures in Bell's paintings seem to beg a narrative interpretation, but Bell also used gesture as a way to express movement (the "circulation for the spectator's gaze," as Héliion termed it).

In the article, Héliion had also applauded Poussin and Seurat, while critiquing Cézanne, who, he said, "seemed to have the desire for such a monumentality, but not yet the means. Cézanne painted fragments." He continued, "In Seurat's pictures the line is continuous, while it is interrupted in Cézanne's."⁴⁷ Bell's work certainly seems to take a similar stance. He was not a Cézannesque painter, in the sense that he created forms with broad, whole planes and dark outlines, uninflected by individual brush marks. The dramatic gestures and broad forms are related to the work of Balthus, another of Bell's principal artistic heroes. (This relationship will be discussed additionally in Chapter 3.) Héliion, in fact, arranged the introduction of Bell to Balthus when Bell traveled to Paris in 1951-52; Bell found him welcoming and made several visits to his studio. In Balthus, Bell found a painter who was unreservedly devoted to art history, but also a painter who was concerned with the interaction and circulation of broad forms. Bell recalled Balthus

⁴⁷ Ibid., 99.

speaking of the struggle to successfully accomplish this movement through a painting and from one color to another; Bell related to this struggle and the literal worked-over nature of his painting and drawing.⁴⁸

It is likely that Bell was also influenced by the example of his wife, Matthiasdottir, who very comfortably applied abstract compositional principles to paintings made from life.⁴⁹ Although Matthiasdottir was reticent, especially compared to the dogmatic fervor with which her husband “converted” their peers, she was no less self-assured. Matthiasdottir has said, “Lee [Leland Bell] was a hero worshipper, which I have never been.”⁵⁰ She also explained:

I was really lucky to come across Lee. He was always my greatest admirer. But maybe all the people around Lee confused me a bit. At that time everybody was painting abstractly, which I was not ready to do. However, there was really no pressure on me to do so. We were very dissimilar painters. It always took Lee a long time to speculate and paint. I am not saying that I never touched a painting after the first attempt, but as a rule I finished a painting in one uninterrupted breath. It suited me best. At that time I did exactly the same as I do now: if I am dissatisfied with the result, I just lay the work aside and say: ‘Good riddance!’⁵¹

Her quotation provides a good sense not only of her working procedures, but also of the ease with which she approached painting. Kresch, recognizing this, said, “Ulla [Matthiasdottir] had everything all together while the rest of us were still searching.”⁵²

Matthiasdottir's 1948 solo exhibition at the Jane Street Gallery included *Boy with Airplane*, 1946 (fig. 2.9), a work that speaks of her ability to reconcile abstraction and

⁴⁸ Leland Bell, interview by Nicholas Fox Weber, in Weber, *Leland Bell* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1986), 26-27.

⁴⁹ This idea is expressed in Martica Sawin, “Early Years in New York,” in Jed Perl, ed. *Louisa Matthiasdottir* (Reykjavik, Iceland: Nesútgáfan Publishing, 1999), 68.

⁵⁰ Louisa Matthiasdottir, interview by Martica Sawin, in Martica Sawin, “Early Years in New York,” in Perl, ed. *Louisa Matthiasdottir*, 56.

⁵¹ Louisa Matthiasdottir, interview by Sigurdur Magnusson, in Magnusson, “Photographic Portrait,” in Perl, ed. *Louisa Matthiasdottir*, 175. (Bell’s nickname was Lee.)

⁵² Albert Kresch, interview by Martica Sawin, in Sawin, “Early Years in New York,” in Perl, *Louisa Matthiasdottir*, 69. (Matthiasdottir’s nickname was Ulla.)

figuration even in the earliest works of her career. As in all of Matthiasdottir's paintings of the period, the image of a boy (her nephew Matti) playing with toys, including an airplane with a brilliant red propeller, is treated as a field for a gathering of shapes and forms.

By 1951, I would propose Matthiasdottir was herself influenced directly by Héliion, and that she was very successful at applying his ideas to her own manner of representational painting. The painting, *Temma Playing*, 1951 (fig. 2.10) seems Héliion-esque in the way form and content are linked: a suggested dramatic narrative enacted by one monumental, outlined figure engaged in private activity (like Héliion's *Newspaper Readers*), and energized by the prominent placement of "props," (like Héliion's umbrellas or men's hats), but played out artistically through the balancing and echoing of form and gesture. A girl is depicted, playing with scissors, causing shards of paper or fabric to fall on her lap and around her feet. Echoing the cut motif is an apple, sliced in half, its core facing up and out. (One might obviously think of Héliion's pumpkins (see fig. 2.11). Behind her, a brown rectangle and yellow plane form the minimal environment and these forms are slashing, angular forms that feel "cut out." Even the bow in the girl's hair is angular, cut, rather than rounded.

The 1948 Bonnard retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art also affected the Jane Street painters in their transition from abstraction to representation. Larry Rivers, who became a Jane Street member that same year, called the Bonnard show a "milestone" in his life. Clement Greenberg reviewed Rivers's first solo exhibition, held at the Jane Street Gallery in April 1949, in such a glowing manner that it shocked even the artist himself. Greenberg wrote:

Judging superficially, one is liable to say that everything Larry Rivers displayed in his first show at the Jane Street Gallery is taken from Bonnard... The similarity is real and conscious, but it accounts really for little in the superb end-effect of Rivers's painting, which has a plenitude and sensuousness all its own... Eventually Rivers may acquire a lushness of color and surface more traditionally appropriate to the vein he paints in, but I for one would rather see this amazing beginner remain with his present approach and exploit further a native force that is already quite apparent in his art. That force, so unlike anything in late impressionism, he owes entirely to himself, and it has already made him a better composer of pictures than was Bonnard himself in many instances.⁵³

For Rivers, the desire to work figuratively was crucial to prove himself as an artist. He recalled of his time at the Hofmann school:

My problem back then in 1947 was that when I started drawing in the presence of a nude female model, all that found its way onto my pages were three peculiar rectangles. At the end of a year I became frantic to draw the figure... If I didn't do this, I'd never be able to convince myself of my genius... It was important to me to solidify my position, to be able to say, yes, don't worry, you are really an artist.⁵⁴

Ironically, the Jane Street artists were returning to figuration just as abstraction was coming powerfully into the mainstream. Blaine joked about the irony of this timing, "I have always had the instinct not to be fashionable."⁵⁵ Blaine, Bell and others in their circle became known as the "second generation New York School painters," but this codification in many ways distorts the reality that several Jane Street artists were passionately devoted to abstraction *before* the Abstract Expressionists. Neither did the Jane Street artists specifically think of themselves as a "New York school." Rather, their awareness of and involvement with the European art tradition profoundly determined their aesthetic decisions. They felt the need to become part of this lineage, rather than to

⁵³ Clement Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Ben Nicholson and Larry Rivers, *The Nation*, 16 April 1949.

⁵⁴ Larry Rivers, interview by Frank O'Hara, in Frank O'Hara, *Art Chronicles 1954-1966* (New York: Braziller, 1975), 110.

⁵⁵ Blaine, interview by Skillion, 73.

break away from it. Conversely, the Abstract Expressionists were positioned as the inventors of something completely new, something purely American. Blaine stated:

We felt an allegiance to the European influence. Eventually the schism became very deep. Those artists who retained a connection with European ideas were treated with hostility by the others who talked of American art as superior and wished to be cut off from the European tradition. I thought this view of “America the Great” was destructive.⁵⁶

Kresch expressed similar thoughts:

They [the Abstract Expressionists] felt they had invented something new, that easel painting had changed with New York artists; and we were looking for something else. We were using the abstract as an armature or a structure onto which to build a painting, and they were using it as the be-all and end-all of the painting. And in a way, we felt that what we were doing was more difficult, because we were trying to interrogate reality, and what we saw, and the visual. They were in the first ecstasies of success and triumph and we just didn't agree.⁵⁷

Kresch's description of the “abstract as an armature or structure” suggests the ways in which abstraction and representation can be reconciled. It is interesting to note that the artists' goals for successful pictorial composition remained constant in many ways throughout their careers, despite a dramatic stylistic evolution. Kresch said of his later landscape paintings, “What I try to get is the excitement of the angles, and the rhythm of the forms.”⁵⁸ Similarly, Blaine said, “...the sense of organization and the way of putting a picture together come from the abstract days. I can approach nature with confidence because of that.”⁵⁹ Such doctrines, first comprehended and articulated during the artists' early years, remain at the core of their achievement.

Blaine's painting, *Sketching the Model*, 1948-49 (fig. 2.12), is a classic example of the transition from abstraction to figuration, in that geometric planar shapes play an

⁵⁶ Blaine, in conversation with Sawin, in Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life*, 34-35.

⁵⁷ Kresch, interview by author, 22 April 2002.

⁵⁸ Kresch, interview by author, 21 November 2002.

⁵⁹ Blaine, interview by Sawin, in Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life*, 40.

important expressive role although the painting depicts a gathering of figures in a life drawing session. Blaine's paint application has radically changed – here it is modulated, differentiated and loose. Still, it includes direct, pure color application, and generalized, abstract forms with some black outlines. Despite the complex arrangement of figures and props against an environment, it feels based upon a geometric formal organization.

In the same year, Kresch painted *The Sea Wall*, 1948 (fig. 2.13), which utilizes highly keyed strokes of color and a geometric organization, but depicts a seaside landscape. In the 1950s he would go on to experiment with gestural figure paintings, but this painting from the late 1940s presages his mature work: small gestural landscape paintings that use bold color to define space.

Bell's early figure paintings are distinct in his oeuvre in their brushy, sketchy quality. In *Study for Two Swedes*, 1955 (fig. 2.14), two figures loosely drawn stand against an abstracted, flat ground. In the background as well Bell leaves his brushstrokes visible. As his figurative painting developed in the coming decades, he returned to the more tightly defined forms of his early abstractions – finding a way to reconcile broad rhythmic forms with reality.

The years of the Jane Street Gallery's existence document a fascinating moment in these young artists' careers: a strong cooperative mentality, and a gradual coming-to-terms with their individual artistic personalities. This transition was an evolution from an idea of what art *should* be, into a realization of how a more intuitive and personal response to the world could be translated artistically. As Héliou had called for “growth” and open-ness, the Jane Street artists gradually let go of their rigid preconceptions about abstraction, and became more open to the possibilities of nature in their work.

Paul Resika: Into Italy

The Jane Street group reached an understanding of how to reconcile the principles of abstraction and figuration within a relatively brief period. They were helped immensely in this journey by the example of Héliou, so it was ironically an avant-garde abstractionist who led the way to their path into representation.

For Paul Resika, however, the way into representation was, at first, much more of a search into techniques of the past. It was charged by Resika's disappointment with Hofmann, for depriving his students of certain lessons of art-making that Resika still considered fundamental – namely the study of anatomy. It did not escape Resika's notice that Hofmann had received this type of training himself:

Hofmann had great training. I'm talking about drawing. He could draw, and if you learn the corny anatomical way academic artists draw, they get these hooks under the muscle. Hofmann knew everything and he had this hand that was fantastically good. But he didn't want us to learn those things.⁶⁰

Although Resika has not mentioned this specifically, it is possible that he became acutely aware of his teacher's capacity for drawing in the corrections Hofmann made on students' drawings. In one of Resika's drawings from the Hofmann class (fig. 2.15), Hofmann has altered the hand of the figure, adding a slightly naturalistic touch to an otherwise planar drawing. The hand is drawn with a kind of virtuosic ease, flowing gentleness in marked contrast with the rest of the overworked charcoal sheet. Hofmann occasionally added this type of correction when he saw students getting too far away from reality - too focused on the abstract space - to remind them to return to nature.

⁶⁰ Resika, interview by Avis Berman, 20 May 2004, transcript, The National Academy of Design Oral History Project, New York, 1-21.

Hofmann's ease with the form of the hand would not have escaped the notice of a sensitive student.

In the years after studying with Hofmann, Resika's visual attention was centered on Picasso's painting, *Guernica*. He has described it as "a great painting that belonged to us," meaning it was easily accessible to him and his painter-friends like Paul Georges, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. They visited it frequently, and the technique of treating a large painting like a drawing, the thin application and use of outline or silhouette, informed their work. Resika's painting, *Motor Shop*, 1948 (fig. 2.16), is an example of this type of approach. Resika recalls an "argument" he had with Hofmann, when he insisted to his teacher that he could find the use of perspective even in Picasso's late painting, and Hofmann denied it.⁶¹ This argument has figured strongly in Resika's feelings about Hofmann and his own artistic path. Resika tells how he raised the subject again with Hofmann many years later, in 1963:

When Hofmann lost his wife,⁶² I remember sitting in this little restaurant, where I used to go almost every night, called Fellin. It was a cold, rainy night, and I looked out the window, and I saw Hofmann with his nose pressed against the glass, looking in. And he was all alone. I ran out and brought him in. And we had the most wonderful conversation, about all these things I'd been thinking about all those years. How I was opposed to him, but I came back to him. I said, "Remember the argument we had about perspective, Mr. Hofmann?" He said, "Oh, don't remember that, it doesn't mean anything." But of course it did mean something. It did mean something to me.⁶³

Motor Shop was included in Resika's first solo show, held at the George Dix Gallery in 1948. This show, held when Resika was only nineteen years old, would seem to have signaled the beginning of a promising career. The painterly vocabulary that

⁶¹ Resika, interview by Berman, 1-21.

⁶² Miz Wolfegg Hofmann died in 1963.

⁶³ Paul Resika, interview by author, tape recording, 31 October 2002, New York.

characterizes these paintings—biomorphic forms, loose handling—is completely in keeping with burgeoning New York School artists like Gorky and de Kooning. However, more recently, Resika viewed *Motor Shop* as an early example of what would follow – the re-introduction of representation. Although it was executed in a modernist vocabulary, he noted that recognizable elements are present: an armature, a vice, a hook, a fan.

For me, this painting [*Motor Shop*] marked the beginning of this turn against abstract art. It wasn't at that time that, but that's what it became. It was against abstract art - Rothko, Pollock, and in a certain way my teacher, Hofmann. That was what was in the air - what came to be called Abstract Expressionism. And in fact that was the time of the best paintings of the Abstract Expressionist period. Where [a painter such as Adolph Gottlieb] was going so strongly and so certainly, we were going the opposite way. He was so certain, and gaining strength every moment. We were going against that. We got some strength from that too, I guess. But we got no support for it.⁶⁴

The years that followed his first exhibition were a continuing transition, a period of experimentation. Like Larry Rivers, Resika was also influenced by the 1948 exhibition of Bonnard at the Museum of Modern Art, which he credited as making “a great impression on all of us. It sort of made us into figurative painters.”⁶⁵ According to Resika, Bonnard was considered “retrograde” at the time, and one expected the Museum of Modern Art to show only artists such as Picasso, Braque, and Mondrian. The very fact that the Modern had put on a Bonnard show was a surprise which captured the artists’ attention. In addition, they found Bonnard’s monumental decorative paintings “heroic”, as opposed to conservative.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Paul Resika, interview by author, tape recording, 14 November 2002, New York.

⁶⁵ Resika, interview by author, 14 November 2002.

⁶⁶ Paul Resika, in conversation with author, 13 January 2008, New York.

Another key influence was Max Beckmann, whose paintings were shown at New York galleries in those years. Beckmann's influence can be felt in the landscapes Resika made around 1948 – portrait-like, expressionist, black-outlined trees. Resika recalled of this period, "It was a difficult time. I didn't know what I was doing, really. The painting was changing.... I started painting landscapes, from nature."⁶⁷ He took a job around this time, which did not last long, and then went to work for his father.

Eventually he was able to convince his family to help support his artistic career instead, and he was sent to Europe with an allowance. By this point he had married a dancer named Annabelle Gold. After a somewhat lonely stint in Paris, Resika followed his wife to Rome, where she had gotten a job with Claude Marchand, a Dunham dancer. There he met the American painter Peter Ruta, who offered him a palatial studio to rent in Venice. Resika accepted, ultimately spending about two years there.

Resika's experience in Venice would more dramatically alter the course of his career. By chance he received a call from Edward Melcarth, an American living in Venice, who had eschewed abstraction for neo-Baroque Social Realist paintings. Melcarth was looking for a studio to rent, and had heard an American painter was living in the palazzo. Melcarth's work was familiar to Resika; he had seen an exhibition in the late 1940s at Durlacher Galleries and been impressed by the sheer size and attack of the work. He remembered wondering "How did he paint this picture?" and reading a review in the Communist paper, *The Daily Worker*, which called Melcarth's painting, "full" and "rich" – the "great new art."

Resika, who was still in search of a technical training, recalled Melcarth was "just what I wanted, so I became his assistant." Melcarth took the huge salon next door to

⁶⁷ Resika, interview by author, 14 November 2002.

Resika's apartment, and Resika worked with him on a massive painting of a sit-down strike at Ford in 1936, that Melcarth intended would decorate a union headquarters.

Resika also began independently making Baroque-style paintings. His *Flour Carriers of the Giudecca*, 1952 (fig. 2.17) is replete with an illusionistic architectural setting (marble stairs, a brick façade, and arched passageway), asymmetrically presented, against which three men with sculpted anatomy labor.

Gradually, as the disciple of Melcarth, Resika came to appreciate Venetian painting. Resika had arrived in Italy with only the vaguest notion of Venetian painting; like most American artists of that time, the main attraction of Italy was Giotto and Piero della Francesca. He stated, "I went to Italy because of Piero della Francesca. I was an American. Venetian art was looked upon as too decadent. It had nothing to do with modern art – American art."⁶⁸ The only Venetians he appreciated at first were Carpaccio and Bellini; he recalls asking his landlady to take down the "dark pictures" that had been left hanging up high in his studio – they turned out to be Domenico Tintoretts. As Resika was exposed to some of the technical processes of painting in the Venetian manner, he began to understand Veronese and Titian. These enthusiasms placed him in a very odd situation upon his return to New York. He was rejecting the pantheon of art history on which modern painting – and abstraction – was based, in favor of a completely different set of artistic models. As Resika remembered:

It was sort of like being crazy – like throwing everything out, like saying, oh, that's not good. When I came back from Europe, and people wanted to see Cézanne or Monet, I would just laugh at them. I thought they had to see Titian or Veronese. So I was a very funny duck. And I was living right on Washington Square, so the Cedar Bar was my local bar.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Resika, interview by author, 31 October 2002.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Resika had rented a studio at No. 3 Washington Square, first as a sublet from Joseph Pollet (interestingly, also a figurative painter, who had important connections with the abstractionists). After several years, Resika was able to move into an entire floor of the building and live as well as work there. In New York, Resika would continue and deepen his realist experimentation. He enrolled in a weekly anatomy class with Philip Reisman. Reflecting on this recently, he admitted:

It was too late to learn anatomy at twenty-five years old. I was already a painter. But it helped me out, at the time, because I was interested in painting like that. I was really lost as far as knowing what modern painting knew. You'd think I would have known, would have gone through it as a kid... I mean, Hofmann tried to tell me, but I was too young and pigheaded to understand. He tried to tell me - you don't do perspective, anatomy, these are not the means.⁷⁰

His painting was getting even tighter than it was in Italy. Instead of large-scale, somewhat painterly scenes, he turned to small, dark portraits.

Edward [Melcarth] was one of my heroes, and I was, for him... an equal, because I was going to carry this thing out, because I was an alive young painter... But it didn't work out, because when I came back to America I didn't have that same impulse to do these great pictures. I wanted to make them more perfect, and then you're really trying to paint like Raphael or something. Then you're really on your own. It was a mad, mad thing to try to do. But anyhow, that's what I did.⁷¹

His neighbors in the building were Edward and Josephine Hopper. When Hopper visited his studio, Resika showed him some big paintings he had made in Venice, and he admired those, saying, "These are good." However, he did not comment on the more recent work. In retrospect, Resika realized Hopper was saying, in effect, "What the hell are you doing?"⁷²

⁷⁰ Resika, interview by author, 14 November 2002.

⁷¹ Resika, interview by Berman, 1-42.

⁷² Resika, interview by Berman, 1-49.

Somehow this period of Resika's career seems more explicable when we are faced with the actual work. His dark portraits are compelling, piercing investigations. In *Untitled Portrait*, 1957 (fig. 2.18), a face peers out from dark shadows, one side partially lit so the eye, brow, and part of forehead are highlighted. The head floats against darkness and becomes a deliberate oval, reminding us of Resika's abstract beginnings. It is a gentle but penetrating investigation. Resika pulls the maximum effect from minimal means and so it becomes understandable that he would explore the possibilities that portraiture could offer him as an artist.

Eventually, Resika would emerge from this phase of his work. He got a job at Cooper Union, and taught figure drawing. (He was fired from the day school for being too retrograde in his use of still-life set ups, but continued to teach a night class.) He naturally started teaching in the style of Hofmann. "With Hofmann you learned to use the whole page. By then I really knew I had learned something from Hofmann, even though I was still reactionary. I knew something a lot of people didn't know. [The students] would draw big figures with charcoal, and open up [the space]." ⁷³

In the late 1950s, Resika would also begin to paint landscapes again. This would eventually lead him back to a personal understanding of how to reconcile figuration and abstraction. As Resika noted, "Once you paint landscapes, you're entering the modern world, at least the modern century... [I took up landscape painting] in desperation, because my pictures were darker and tighter and more miserable, I guess." ⁷⁴

Resika's path was very different from the Jane Street Group, in that they were able, early on, to view figurative painting in the same theoretical framework as

⁷³ Resika, interview by Berman, 1-53.

⁷⁴ Resika, interview by Berman, 1-56.

abstraction, with the help of Héliion's ideology. Resika had to reject modern painting and abstraction entirely before he – inevitably – returned to it. Resika recently explained the difference between himself and the Jane Street artists, as well as his own re-emergence as a landscapist:

I didn't know Leland [Bell] or Ulla [Matthiasdottir] in the Hofmann period, or when I came back as a classic artist. Then after a few years, we did meet, and [Bell] became a good friend. He was always friends with De Niro, and De Niro I always knew. I didn't know Al Kresch either. Al and Lee and Ulla were a separate group, and they were clear in what they were doing. They were clear they were modernists – it was a different modernist camp – but they were never against modern art. Leland never said that modern art was no good – that was crazy. He understood it through French art – through Derain. He didn't ever become an Italian, or a Spaniard. They were much healthier, they understood, they were more sophisticated than I was. I was more romantic, and trying to figure it out for myself, thinking that I could do it myself. So in a way I lost a lot of time, fighting these things, but that was the way I had to learn... So when I became a landscape painter– [Thomas] Hess gave me an article right away [in *Art News*].⁷⁵ Had I not been a kid with Hofmann, they probably never would have written that article about me when I was only thirty-eight. So I got a certain credit for that, so I could hold out and find a way.⁷⁶

Between 1948—when Resika's show at George Dix Gallery was held—until 1964, Resika did not have a single exhibition of his work. Beginning in 1964, he began to show his landscapes regularly at Peridot Gallery.

Resika's path might seem surprising, or meandering, but it ultimately led him to a place where he was able to more fully assimilate Hofmann's lessons, and achieve an understanding of how to reconcile abstraction and representation. Resika's earliest (student) paintings, marine pictures such as *Rocks and Sea*, 1943 (fig. 2.19), were

⁷⁵ A feature article on Resika appeared in *Art News*, under the editorship of Thomas Hess: Claire Nicholas White, "Resika's Delectable Mountains." *Art News* 66 (April 1967): 48-49. The article discussed Resika's recent work, as well as his transition from a student of Hofmann who worked abstractly, to his time in Italy and "passion for the grand manner," and return to landscape painting.

⁷⁶ Resika, interview by author, 31 October 2002.

executed in a vocabulary informed by Blakelock and Ryder – thickly trowelled paint marking jagged rock formations, night skies and water. In the paintings of the late 1940s that were exhibited in his first solo show, at George Dix Gallery, Resika used biomorphic forms and highly keyed color in paintings such as *The Subway*, 1947 (fig. 2.20). Line forms matrix-like worlds that hover between reality and the abstract, in a painting such as *Sweeney Among the Nightingales*, 1946-47 (fig. 2.21). This period seems a synthesis of Matisse and Picasso – appropriate for a recent Hofmann student. This period comes to a close with Resika’s Italian explorations. By the late 1950s and early 1960s Resika began his Corot and Courbet-influenced landscapes, which continued to make use of aerial or atmospheric perspective. They were painted with a palette of umber, green, gray-blue: pastoral landscapes, big scumbled skies, forests of trees, and the occasional nude. It is in the 1980s that the highly keyed, unmodulated color for which Resika is now known, made its appearance, and with it, space was again flattened: the trio of land, sea and sky all existing on the same two-dimensional, painterly field of color. Resika, in this period, painted, once again, like an “abstract” painter, and one is tempted to ask what the lesson was of those intervening years. However, his later work has an ease of touch that might not have been possible without the technical proficiency he gained from studying anatomy and the old masters. With Resika’s natural, easy approach to marking the shape of a boat, the form of a house, the ripples of water – these elements can become merely building blocks in a planar composition. In a letter to Joseph Plaskett, a friend and another former Hofmann student, Resika wrote: “Every day I try to remember [Hofmann’s] great lesson: destroy it, change it, clarify, make it whole!”⁷⁷ This motto

⁷⁷ Paul Resika, letter to Joseph Plaskett, in Joseph Plaskett, “Homage.” *Joseph Plaskett*. Exh. cat. (Victoria, British Columbia, Canada: Winchester Galleries, June 2006).

seems not only relevant to a way of approaching a specific painting, but also Resika's path as a whole. He destroyed and changed the way he was taught, to ultimately arrive at a clarification – a simplification of means and technique, making whole the polarization of abstraction and representation.

Mercedes Matter: In Search of a “Real Presence”

A decisive shift in the work of Mercedes Matter occurred almost exactly at the same time as it did for the Jane Street Group and for Resika. Although Matter always worked from life, a paradigm shift related to the issues of abstraction and representation occurred, having dramatic repercussions in her work. In the years before 1948, Matter's primary concerns were the organization of forms in a “Cubist” construction informed by her father, the painter Arthur B. Carles, and the theory of Hofmann. In 1948, she viewed an exhibition of Alberto Giacometti at the Pierre Matisse Gallery. As Matter herself states, this exhibition “instantly changed everything... it was a change of epoch... his show was so important. It was just a radical change of one's awareness.”⁷⁸ Following the Giacometti show, Matter's approach to painting changed. An emphasis on the process of working, as informed by Giacometti's ideology became a key component of Matter's work. In addition, she found in Giacometti's sculpture a “real and magical presence” that she believed was achieved by a “total correspondence to perception and experience.” Therefore, the issue of perception also became central to Matter's approach. In this way, Matter moved from an “abstract” to a “representational” artist, although she continually worked from life. She remained interested in the picture plane,

⁷⁸ Mercedes Matter, interview by Sigmund Koch, transcript, 19-20 December 1986, Aesthetics Research Archive, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, 188, 200.

and the intervals between objects (as discussed in Chapter 1), but perception and the achievement of an equivalency to experience albeit not in the form of a standard likeness – became a paramount concern.

Matter, because of her artistic and cosmopolitan family, was steeped in painting from a young age. In addition to her father, Matter was exposed to art by her mother, who painted and was a musician and artists' model, her mother's sister, who was a successful portrait etcher, and her father's sister, who also painted. Her ability to reconcile the issues of abstraction and figuration may be related to the contact she had with many worlds of art. Matter learned by example from her father that the issues of representation and abstraction were fluid. She recalled seeing paintings of Picasso and Braque at the age of seven or eight in the living room of her father's close friend, Earle Horter, a painter and early American collector of cubism, although she states, "These paintings didn't register for me. I mean, I was maybe seven or eight years old. They just looked dull, because they were brown. But there was one Picasso that was red and green and black and white, which may have had an influence on those paintings [from the 1930s] I did, that I always focused on." In those early years, she was also exposed first-hand to 19th-century painting and to Renaissance artists. Matter continued:

I liked Renoir, and my father had a patron for some years who owned some marvelous paintings. He owned one of the *Mont Sainte-Victoire's* of Cézanne, and a large *Bathers* of Renoir, and *Le Bon Bock* of Monet. My father used to take me to the Barnes Foundation and there were lots of Renoirs there. I also loved my father's paintings. They were very exciting to me as a small child, because they were brilliant in color.⁷⁹

As an adolescent, Matter lived in Europe for two years. When she was twelve, she spent a summer in Venice, where she remembers discovering Giovanni Bellini. "I

⁷⁹ Ibid., 164-165.

fell in love with him, and I just looked at every painting in Venice by him, and I drew Madonnas all the time.” Matter also recalls a vivid experience of traveling to Assisi during the same period:

My mother and I arrived in Assisi in the late afternoon and it was the time of Benediction. We went into the lower church where Benediction was happening, and in the flickering light, I saw the Saint Francis of Cimabue, and I remember with this marvelous music, the whole excitement of having it together and being a Catholic and believing it at the same time then.⁸⁰

The old masters, and the history of art, were not foreign or “other” to Matter, in the way they might have been for other American painters. Matter’s experience in Italy, for example, is quite different from that of Resika, who perceived it from an American perspective and was compelled to relive the past before moving on to the present. Other American modernists felt a need to cut themselves off from this rich tradition and start anew. Matter, however, felt that “one of the nice things about Hofmann was that he wasn’t at all saying ‘the hell with the past,’ like the American Abstract Artists.”⁸¹ When asked in an interview whether it was challenging to reconcile her love for Bellini and Giotto with an awareness of the twentieth century, Matter replied, “No, I didn’t find it a problem.”⁸² She did remember, however, her trouble early on understanding Picasso. This changed when she studied with Hofmann, “and the doors opened, because my father talked a bit over my head until I had the key.... Then Picasso became like the ground under my feet; he dominated everything... until after the War, when I saw the Giacometti show and that just totally changed the world for me.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Ibid., 166.

⁸¹ Ibid., 173.

⁸² Ibid., 167.

⁸³ Ibid., 167-168.

As Matter developed as a painter herself, her friendships and close associations with key figures in the art world grew vast and wide-ranging. She was an inspiring force to many. Vita Petersen believes that because of her father's example, she fiercely believed in the "ideal of the artist," and she placed her artist friends in this role – encouraging their work and engaging them in endless intellectual conversations about art. Matter's appreciation for serious artists enabled her to interact with and consider artists from many different circles – abstract and figurative, foreign and American. She also served as an intermediary, introducing artists who were otherwise not associated; for example, she and her husband took Franz Kline and de Kooning to visit the Calders in Connecticut. "They were two separate worlds, you know; the Calders had nothing to do with the Artist's Club and we knew both."⁸⁴

Matter's experiences and friendships positioned her squarely within the vanguard of abstraction in New York. In 1934, Matter became a founding member of the Abstract American Artists Group, which she described as "Ninety percent students of Hofmann."⁸⁵ She found an arrogance in the group, which she did not completely share, about the authority of abstraction over other modes of painting, recalling:

We, who'd studied with Hofmann, had seen the light; we needed to establish what we knew above everybody else.... There was an attitude among abstract painters then that all the artists of the past never knew everything. They didn't know about abstract art. ... I can remember one [member] who is well known now, talking condescendingly about Rembrandt!⁸⁶

In 1935 Matter joined the WPA / FAP mural division, working under the direction of Burgoyne Diller, an abstractionist with a Mondrian-influenced style. It was in the

⁸⁴ Ibid., 194-195.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 24-25.

WPA that Matter met de Kooning and Arshile Gorky and Lee Krasner. Her friendship with Gorky led to a brief intimate affair (at the time, Matter's lover was the abstract sculptor Wilfred Zogbaum.) Yet Matter also had connections with representational artists. She spent a summer on the WPA working in Provincetown, where she met Edwin Dickinson, becoming his model, friend, and working in the adjoining studio. Matter recalled that Dickinson had pinned up in his studio a reproduction of the Picasso painting, *Femme au Coq*, a particularly intense 1938 painting showing a woman clutching a whole chicken with a knife beside her on the floor. Matter was intrigued by the apparent dichotomy between the rather brutal Picasso painting, and Dickinson's gentler, romantic landscapes and portraits. Matter asked Dickinson about the reproduction, learning that Dickinson respected his differences with Picasso but deeply admired him. Matter was also interested by the disparity between the evocations of Dickinson's work, his personality, and his persona in the studio:

I saw him painting, which was very interesting, because he was such a distinguished gentleman, who looked like a judge or a minister. And then, when he'd start to paint he was like a wild beast. He made the most tremendously frightening expressions and sounds. He was just ferocious; it was a total transformation.⁸⁷

Such observations may have made Matter less likely to pigeonhole an artist's project into categories of abstract versus figurative; tranquil versus fierce. She was attracted to similar stories about Matisse and Renoir, who we traditionally consider "serene" painters but were tortured by nightmares and physical pain, respectively.⁸⁸

During Matter's time with the WPA, Fernand Léger was invited to collaborate with the Administration on a special mural project, and Matter, who spoke French, was

⁸⁷ Ibid., 179-180.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 181.

hired as Léger's translator. Léger's mural never materialized, but Matter became his close friend, and took him to visit her father in Philadelphia. De Kooning was also part of this project, and recalled:

Léger looked like a longshoreman - a big man...He didn't look like a great artist; there was nothing artistic about him. There were seven other assistants: Harry Bowden, Byron Browne, Balcomb Greene, Paul Kelpé, Mercedes Matter, George McNeil, and José de Rivera. Mercedes interpreted. We all went to the French Line with Léger. He decided to take the outside of the pier where there was ironwork, and we would do the inside rooms; each of us was to have one panel. He sent us to the Museum of Natural History to get ideas about the sea. He told us to make a list of objects having to do with the sea - ordinary objects. We were to do our own designs, and he would criticize them and unify them. We really wouldn't be like assistants; he was very nice about this. He criticized us as if we were professionals. We were all working in the same room at 39th Street and Fifth Avenue. It was just like a shop. He seemed a little bored with our sketches, but he was surprised and favorably impressed to find so many New York artists more than in Paris - who understood his work and were able to work with him.⁸⁹

Matter recalled, "Léger showed me the side of New York I didn't know. He said, "Never go where there's good taste, always go where it says no trespassing. And he took me along the river, which then had shacks of the homeless and so on." Léger had also been responsible for the meeting of Mercedes and Herbert. Herbert had been his student in Paris, and Léger recommended Mercedes to work with Herbert on the Swiss Pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair in New York. The two worked together and then became a couple, marrying in 1941. In 1940, Léger lived in the Matters' studio in New York for a year, and Mercedes had the opportunity to watch him work. She later compared his studio persona to Dickinson, whose behavior while working seemed so dissonant from what one might expect based on his personality and artwork, noting that Léger was

⁸⁹ Willem de Kooning, in Irving Sandler, "Conversations with De Kooning," *Art Journal* 48 (Autumn 1989): 216.

“exactly the same when he was working [as he was otherwise].” This was reinforced by de Kooning, who found Léger direct and workmanlike.⁹⁰

Ultimately, Léger may have provided a distinct example of how representation and abstraction could be reconciled – in a similarly direct way. In the WPA project he had advised his students to approach the mural design by gathering real images and objects and translating them into a formal structure. His own work had shifted beginning around 1920, and more recognizable elements and figures (the “machine man imagery”) entered his painting. However, he nevertheless maintained an emphasis on a clarified, planar structure. Léger stated, “What we call an abstract picture does not exist. There is neither an abstract picture nor a concrete one. There is a beautiful picture and a bad picture. There is the picture that moves you and the picture that leaves you indifferent.”⁹¹ Similarly, he also said, “as I understand it, pictorial realism in painting is the simultaneous ordering of three great plastic components: Lines, Forms, and Colors.”⁹² These type of statements would have resonated deeply with Matter (and the other painters discussed in this chapter), who ultimately found that the same values infiltrated and informed both abstract and figurative painting.

During the war, Matter moved with her husband to California, where he was working with Charles and Rae Eames (the latter had been in Hofmann’s class along with Mercedes). Matter disliked her life in California. She was raising her infant son, was withdrawn from her artistic circles, and had little time to paint. She returned to New

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Fernand Léger, “The New Realism” (1935), in Edward F. Fry, ed., and Alexandra Anderson, trans. *The Documents of 20th-Century Art: Functions of Painting by Fernand Léger* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 111.

⁹² Fernand Léger, “The Origins of Painting and Its Representational Value” (1913), in Fry, ed., and Anderson, trans., 4.

York in 1946 with her son Alex (Herbert remained in California until the end of the year), and resumed her place at the center of developing art movements, including the rising Abstract Expressionist circle. She remembers seeing a show at the Whitney Museum that included De Kooning's painting *Attic*, 1949. In the summer she went to Springs where she visited with her old friend Lee Krasner, by this time married to Jackson Pollock. "There was this burgeoning of energy and synergy in the air, and things happening."⁹³ She spent time at the Waldorf Cafeteria, where painters met in the evening. Of this milieu, Matter stated, "There were two courts at the Waldorf; one was held by Aristodimos Kaldis, a Greek painter who was a friend of ours, and the other was [Landes] Lewitin." This evolved into the Club, led by Philip Pavia, impressed by the fact that "what was wonderful was that you would have in one room the diversity of Dickinson, Barney Newman, John Cage, Lionel Abel, Harold Rosenberg, de Kooning, Kline. But it wasn't one direction at all; you had to be an artist, that was the point. ... It was so alive, and there was a wonderful spirit of good feeling among people."⁹⁴

Matter valued the commitment, the probing quest of the artist as apposed to a categorical approach of abstract / geometric / figurative. She was also comfortable positioning herself within mostly "abstractionist" circles, apparently not concerned with what importance her own process of working from life assumed for her status in the Abstract American Artists group or the Club.

Matter did, however, work through the consequences of the shift that occurred in her thinking after having seen Giacometti's sculpture and considered its implications. Matter's early work is informed by Cézanne, Hofmann, and Carles, her father. In

⁹³ Matter, interview by Koch, 32-33.

⁹⁴ Matter, interview by Koch, 35-36.

paintings such as *Untitled (Number 9)*, 1933 (fig. 2.22) she works with a light touch, reducing a still life into broad color planes, spread minimally across a white canvas, creating a spatial orchestration. Within the next years, her constructions become more densely configured, with forms interacting and pressing up against one another, and line playing a greater role. Still, her work emphasizes the interaction and interplay of form and line as opposed to any external referent or evocation. Giacometti's example seemed to give Matter permission to devote herself to perception and the process. "Process" played a limited role in the work of Hofmann or Carles, although it was such a key issue in the theoretical basis of Abstract Expressionist painting. Rosenberg's essay *Action Painting* (1952) established the idea of the artist's approach and interaction with the canvas as a critical aspect of art-making. In doing this, he also effectively linked existentialism—a prevailing philosophical ideology of the time—to painting. Matter was a friend of Rosenberg and they had an affair in the early 1940s.⁹⁵ Matter was interested in the way artists worked, their process and studio persona (as shown by her quotations above on Dickinson, Léger, Matisse and Renoir), probably because it fed on her ideas about the "ideal of the artist." The anxiety and challenge of the process became central to her ideas of art-making. It was important for her to reconcile a more formal idea of spatial organization with an interest in representing the essence of the subject. Matter justified her interest in Giacometti by noting that his sculpture owed much to Cézanne, whom she considered one of her preminent "teachers." Matter stated, "[Giacometti's sculpture] just dislodged everything ... Just the possibility that this could exist, and yet, in another way, it was not alien at all, in the approach to form it wasn't. Cézanne is

⁹⁵ This was confirmed by Vita Petersen, interview by author, 30 January 2008, New York.

present in Giacometti so very much, and I feel my roots are in Cézanne, but then there was this other quality of a magical presence, of a real presence.”⁹⁶

Giacometti also justified for Matter a rather problematic aspect of her work and career – that she often failed to finish work, and also destroyed it. She said:

He was very important to me, his whole attitude and thinking too; it was a confirmation for me. ... Having destroyed so much of my work, I still have felt, even before knowing Giacometti, that I still would rather have gone that way in order to grow through that, than to leave things too soon. I felt that it was more valuable to go through to try to reach that ultimate end that I was after, even if I destroyed it in the process, if I got further along in myself. Well, of course that’s what he talks about all the time and so wonderfully; he never even thought of finishing anything – whether he failed or won or lost in any work. It was what he had gained by doing it, and that was very consoling.⁹⁷

Herbert Matter photographed the sculpture of Giacometti, and produced a major book on the artist, which included an essay by Mercedes.⁹⁸ She began her essay by describing the “Sisyphus” like nature of beginning again each day and undoing the previous day’s work. The fact that the final product, the image, could be different from what went into the making of the work was important to Matter. In her case, a still life was not an image or illustration, but a complex process.

In her painting, *Still Life*, c. 1990s (fig. 2.23), Matter employed a touch reminiscent of that found in Giacometti’s work (his painting, drawing, and sculpture). She demarcated each form and area with a series of brusque, punctuating lines, increasing the fluidity and movement of each form. These lines also serve as a reminder of the artist’s process, the attempt by the artist to place things in space. They leave the painting open in a certain way – forms are not finalized by a definitive outline or unmodulated

⁹⁶ Matter, interview by Koch, 202.

⁹⁷ Matter, interview by Koch, 202.

⁹⁸ *Alberto Giacometti*. Photographed by Herbert Matter, text by Mercedes Matter, foreword by Louis Finkelstein and an introduction by Andrew Forge (New York: Abrams, 1987).

surface. Compositionally, as well, the painting has a relationship to Giacometti's work. The still life seems to loom above us in a pyramidal formation: heavy near the bottom, disappearing on top, with blank space at the upper corners. Giacometti's sculptures also often tower above us: thicker torsos culminating in elongated necks and heads.

Unlike some of the members of the Jane Street Group, Matter's shift was not a polarizing one. She was not an "evangelist" for abstraction like Bell; her work did not change dramatically the way Blaine's did. She maintained and nourished wide-ranging connections in the art world rather than limiting herself to a small group of like-minded peers. And unlike Resika, Matter did not need to reject her teacher and absorb the (European) past, because this history was already a part of her. Instead, Matter's shift was subtle – she continued to work from life as she had before. She internalized the lessons of Giacometti, which allowed her to focus deeply on perception. Giacometti's ideals gave validity to her process: the insistence that the still life upon which her painting was based was unchanged – not moved or altered - from beginning to end. The goal was now to create a real presence, using perception but also, and above all, an awareness of formal means.

Rosemarie Beck: From Closed to Open

Rosemarie Beck's transition from abstraction to figuration came about a decade later than the other artists discussed in this chapter; it happened in the late 1950s. For Beck, the transition was characterized by an "opening up": allowing her whole self and interests to enter her paintings: literary, romantic, and autobiographical. In the same sense, she was motivated by a desire to complicate her paintings. For her, representation

introduced difficult issues, processes, and stumbling blocks into painting that abstraction eliminated. Beck welcomed and demanded these challenges.

Beck had no formal training as a painter. She grew up in Westchester, New York, and was a serious musician - she began studying violin at age 10, and later played professionally with a string quartet. In high school and college, she was involved in the theater, doing set and costume design, performing, and directing. At Oberlin College, Beck majored in art history, and continued to study art history in graduate work at both New York University and Columbia. In 1947, Beck moved to Woodstock with her husband, the literary scholar Robert Phelps. There they met Philip Guston and Bradley Walker Tomlin. These friendships formed the basis of Beck's "education" as a painter. At the time, Guston's work was transitioning towards abstraction, but Beck remembered that when they met "Guston was still doing figures."⁹⁹ She told of their meeting: "We met at a concert – [he and his wife] had noticed that we were reading the music and invited us over. We went to the studio and I saw his palette with 10,000 shades of wonderful colors – the range of subtle colors on Guston's palette, exquisite degrees of modulation."¹⁰⁰ Beck recalled that Tomlin was also in a transition towards abstraction during this period: "Tomlin had been under the influence of Mark Tobey which led to his breaking away from the specificity of an object."¹⁰¹ Therefore, much of the discussion among the artists was centered around whether to be representational or not. The rationale for abstraction came down to the idea that painting was "finally was about

⁹⁹ Rosemarie Beck, interview by Martica Sawin, 2002, typed notes, copy in author's files, courtesy of Martica Sawin, New York.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

itself.”¹⁰² In this, they were echoing the theoretical basis of Abstract Expressionism as defined by Greenberg; as Beck further articulated: “the concept that the true subject of any picture is the act of painting itself.”¹⁰³

Beck and her family had little money in this period; they lived all year in a barely heated summer cottage on a lake. She made ends meet by housecleaning, working in a store, and babysitting. Still she remembers it as an idyllic time, in which energy was spent thinking and conversing about the nature of art-making, and painting. Her friendships with Guston and Tomlin exposed her to the ideal of the artistic life. Painting abstractly, focusing on the act of painting itself “seemed to be the most blissful state.”

Tomlin was sharing a studio with Robert Motherwell in New York City. He arranged for Beck to go there and paint after her son was born and she and her family were living with her parents in New Rochelle. Motherwell was just establishing his Subjects of the Artist School, and Beck studied with him. Beck recalled that he too “had a way of making exciting the romance of modern art.”¹⁰⁴ However, he offered little concrete guidance:

Once a week Motherwell appeared late in the evening and talked. He talked about his own taste, his reading, his personal life, his cooking, all brilliantly. But rarely did he analyze, criticize, define, describe, or offer suggestions, as to anyone’s work. At the most, he would say something like this, “You were right to put that white into the painting. I knew it needed it – right there!” I found this enlightening, confirming, and extraordinarily liberating though I could not have told you why. Perhaps it was simply having someone else’s eye on my work. Being in a way, disburdened.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Rosemarie Beck, interview by author, tape recording, 7 November 2002, New York.

¹⁰³ Rosemarie Beck, “Text of an Informal Talk Originally Delivered in May 1960, at Connecticut Wesleyan University,” Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck, New York.

¹⁰⁴ Rosemarie Beck, in conversation with Martica Sawin, 2002. In Martica Sawin, “Rosemarie Beck: Never Form But Forming,” in *Rosemarie Beck: Paintings 1965-2001*. Exh. cat. (Dayton, Ohio: University Galleries, Wright State University, 2002), 4.

¹⁰⁵ Rosemarie Beck, Untitled, undated lecture, Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck, New York.

Beck watched Guston give up the last vestiges of subject matter around the time of his trip to Italy in 1949. By the early 1950s, Beck was making tapestry-like, hatched paintings that were greatly informed by Guston's "abstract impressionist" work. In *House of the Moon*, 1956 (fig. 2.24), the entire painting field is covered with small, hatched brushstrokes. A mass of pale yellow floats against a bluish-gray ground, with patches of white and green accents. It is an elegant, atmospheric painting, completely abstract yet suggestive of nature or an ethereal landscape – a feeling also evoked by its title.

Beck had three exhibitions of abstract paintings at Peridot Gallery, in 1953, 1955, and 1956. She began to achieve a certain success and recognition for this work. In 1955, she was part of an exhibition at the Whitney Museum: "Contemporary American Painting." In 1956, she was included in an exhibition, "New Talent in the USA" at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York City. One of her paintings was shown in 1958 at the Whitney Museum's show, "Nature in Abstraction." Although her abstract painting and her associations with Guston and Tomlin seemed to be propelling her towards a successful career, Beck's work was changing. Her fourth show at Peridot would include still-lives, figures, and interiors. In retrospect, Beck realized that she was always a "secret realist" – she participated in regular drawing sessions in Woodstock. By February 1953 she confided in her journal with misgivings, "I sense... the tendency to go back to the figure and all the trappings of the studio. Where it has happened so far it is too dreadful for words, formula-bound and cold as a fish."¹⁰⁶ She also wondered, "Why do we choose this non-figurative world when the world of objects can be so clear?" and answered

¹⁰⁶ Rosemarie Beck, Journals, February 1953, Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck, Home of Doria Hughes, Boston.

herself, perhaps a bit unconvincingly, “It’s because there are no precedents – we have carte-blanche for our feelings. Only the most personal plastic relations can express us there. There we ought / can be most true.”¹⁰⁷ It was not until a decade later that Beck was able to more securely formulate her opinion on the matter, defending her choice of figuration:

I have heard painters say they want to avoid the common inventory of things; they want the real subject of painting – its essence, its pure structure. They proceed directly out of the general (whereas painters of the past have begun almost always with the particular) from the found rather than the made; they are concerned with wholes rather than parts. The Means becomes Content and / or Subject. One of the reasons I returned to the specific, to the external referent... is that I began to find it superficial always to be at the mercy of the look of my pictures from moment to moment... I wanted to be rid of contemporary traps – the myriad conventions and affectations which have sprung up... I wanted to be able to tell myself, “This shape is behind this other shape; it has a bottom and sides.” I wanted to be clear about the parts as well as the whole, to separate them, as it were. I am now convinced that if the anguish of paradox is not somewhere felt – the paradox of a patch of paint being also a hand or an apple – we are still hungry; there is not enough food for the mind.¹⁰⁸

Two years prior to delivering this statement, Beck had begun her definitive transition into representation, with a 1958 painting, *Self Portrait* (fig. 2.25), that literally shows forms - the artist, a violin, and still life - emerging out of an abstract grid. Over the next years she would move into paintings of studio interiors with figures, and eventually mythological and literary themes. Beck later remarked of this process:

It doesn't take very long to be a very good abstract painter. It takes a very long time to become a good figurative painter. Because of this burden you're carrying - of the image. These issues confuse - and should, I think. But the formal issues of painting seem to be clearer when there's

¹⁰⁷ Rosemarie Beck, Journals, July 20 1956, Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck, Home of Doria Hughes, Boston.

¹⁰⁸ Rosemarie Beck, “Text of an Informal Talk Originally Delivered in May 1960, at Connecticut Wesleyan University.” Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck, courtesy of Martha Hayden, New York.

something to construct. Something in front of your eyes, or in your mind, something that belongs to the world, like a tree, or a figure....¹⁰⁹

In a similar vein, she also stated:

The failures are much bigger when you're a realist painter. They're more obvious. If a hand is coming out of the middle of your belly, you can't say, well, I like it that way. But an abstract form can sit anywhere if it sits well, or lies flat, or behaves so it's not recognizable. If, on the other hand, a face has an expression, it's not just a set of formal relations which when turned upside down might work just fine. It always gives off something – anger or dumbness or sweetness or something – and if it's contrary to the mood that you're setting up in the abstract rhythm itself, it has to be dealt with perhaps to the point of having to paint through the whole picture just to get the smile off the face. It's incidental to painting but part of its business.¹¹⁰

Beck was ultimately an artist who was interested in complicating the process of making a picture. Interestingly, she spoke of what she considered the ease or solipsism of abstraction in terms of “naturalism.” She stated:

I've always disliked the naturalism inherent in abstract expressionist painting... a naturalism inherent in this kind of painting's landscapeness, figureness, geometryness. Apotheosizing the means tends to do this for the means is nothing more than paintedness when all is said and done, and is therefore like nature; it's natural. Maybe I mean only this: The thing one is after is really so difficult, so inaccessible that the means had better be particular, not general; precise, not indulgent – in order that a sturdy bridge be constructed to whatever we mean by the universal.¹¹¹

Beck's process of transition from abstraction to representation was a process of opening up more possibility, allowing her interests – personal, literary, and musical – to enter her work and become part of her communication. As a writer and thinker, Beck was profuse: she was more interested in articulating details than paring down to essences. In fact, she

¹⁰⁹ Rosemarie Beck, interview by author, 7 November 2002.

¹¹⁰ Rosemarie Beck, in Kim Levin, “Conversation with Rosemarie Beck,” *Arts Magazine* 53 (February 1979): 107.

¹¹¹ Rosemarie Beck, “Text of an Informal Talk Originally Delivered in May 1960, at Connecticut Wesleyan University.”

divided artists into those who were “closed” and those who were “open,” considering herself the latter. She admired both categories – the peer she most admired was Bell, whom she considered her opposite in that he was “closed.”¹¹² But as a painter herself and as a teacher, she aspired to opening, to getting more out of herself and her students. Towards the end of her career she even admitted often being unable to know when a painting was completed, saying “I used to know when everything was tied up. Now I don't know. I want to open it each time.” She considered her friend and colleague at the New York Studio School, Louis Finkelstein, an “open artist.” In the tribute she delivered at his memorial, Beck recalled that “On his deathbed, we spoke of doing a dialogue for the New York Studio School, to be called tentatively, ‘In Praise of Opening’... Reduction, simplification was never his way...”¹¹³

In this way, Beck can actually be related to the thesis of Héliion’s essay discussed earlier in this chapter, *From Reduction to Growth*. (There is no evidence that Beck was interested in Héliion; this may be simply an example of a synchronicity of thought.) In speaking of the solipsism that abstraction could embody, and her own desire to be more open, richer with ideas and content, Beck echoed Héliion’s plea to artists to grow and expand, as opposed to narrowing their production and process. As Héliion had used these ideas as an apology for his own transition from abstraction to figuration, so did Beck.

Beck’s first series of figurative work revolved around the theme of *Le Maquillage* (females in interiors getting dressed and made-up). She moved on to incorporate literary themes like the Orpheus myth, Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, Ovid, Antigone, and Euripides. Each of these subjects moved her, to the degree that she produced dozens of studies and

¹¹² Rosemarie Beck, interview by author, 7 November 2002.

¹¹³ Rosemarie Beck, speech for memorial for Louis Finkelstein, 2000, Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck.

paintings on each for years before moving on to the next subject. Sometimes it was simply a visual evocation that grabbed her: like the stage direction in *The Tempest*: “Enter mariners, wet.”¹¹⁴ However, Beck was also drawn to the stories as metaphors for human existence and life lessons. Orpheus appealed to her because it was centered around “a maker and his magic,” and the tragedy of losing his muse and inspiration.¹¹⁵ Beck was also deeply interested in astrology, especially in the earlier part of her career. She did her own chart and that of family and friends – and even that of fictional characters at the request of her friend Bernard Malamud, to help him in developing a character. Beck later said of her figurative painting:

I [was] using thematic material based on the wheel of the horoscope. It was my intention to cover all of life as a life work. The twelve houses, the twelve signs: the House of Mercury, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, etc. I found myself fixed in the House of Venus – Venus the planet of love, beauty, art... many of my future themes have sprung from this intractable nugget.¹¹⁶

However, like all of the other artists discussed in this chapter, a commitment to the formal issues of painting remained her priority. When an interviewer noted, “I get the idea that form is very important to you,” Beck responded, “Absolutely. First. That’s why subject is so enticing too. It puts so many stones in the way of realizing one’s form. It’s just the kind of limitation that liberates invention.”¹¹⁷

Beck was invited to participate in a panel discussion titled, “Is the Picture Plane *Passée*,” and she stated that the title embarrassed her. She declared that the picture plane was not only relevant, but the top priority of painting. She echoed the sentiment of most

¹¹⁴ *The Tempest*, act 1, scene 1.

¹¹⁵ Rosemarie Beck, in Levin, 107.

¹¹⁶ Rosemarie Beck, *Untitled*, undated lecture on Beck’s education as a painter. Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck.

¹¹⁷ Rosemarie Beck, in Levin, 107.

of the other artists discussed in this dissertation and in particular the theory of Hofmann when she stated:

For me, personally, conceiving the picture plane is *numero uno* in my book of rules, without which I have no formal satisfactions. In fact, I'm unable to take seriously any art performed today which does not accede to the paradox which is the concomitant of this ideal: you have to put it down flat to make it round, spatial – a ramifying, metaphor-making principle upon which everything depends. Corollary to this is that the picture is a picture first and not politics or philosophy or good will or LIFE, though of course these things are unavoidable because they exist in the person.¹¹⁸

Beck found that the formal “rules” she learned as an abstractionist applied to her representational painting, and she carried them forth, throughout her career:

There were some rules that were fixed upon us at the time, like the Holy Grail. Namely, that art had to be flat. That you couldn't be illusionistic. That was a rule that I carried with me, it was a rather good issue in a way. In other words, I didn't want to fly into ambiguities. I wanted to be sure that two things are working together. Sometimes I turned my pictures upside down, not because of the subject matter, but because of my issue with the space. It's all formal.¹¹⁹

Beck's *Double Portrait*, 1959 (fig. 2.26) is an early example of Beck's figurative painting. In it abstraction and figuration play against each other on various levels. Above two figures of young boys are two abstract, patterned wall hangings or designs. The boys sit and examine a book of reproductions that appear abstract. Also on the table before them are a white bowl and sheet of paper – which, in their plainness, emphasize geometric shape more than any specific objecthood. The entire painting is constructed with Beck's characteristic hatched brushstroke. Here her strokes are mostly horizontal and vertical, which also serve to remind us of an overall geometric structure. Still, through the image—the representation—the painting transmits an emotional, personal

¹¹⁸ Rosemarie Beck, Untitled, undated lecture for a panel discussion entitled “Is the Picture Plane Passé?” Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck, New York.

¹¹⁹ Rosemarie Beck, interview by author, 7 November 2002.

reality. We are compelled into this world – the interaction between the boys, their study of images, and the implications of the twin abstract designs which hover over the two boys respectively: one a heart shaped flower with petals, the other a more cubist, Picasso-like persona. One boy points at the book studiously, the other boy, who is closer to the book, looks off into space dreamily.

In her figurative paintings, Beck constructed worlds such as this. The desire to construct worlds and articulate the emotional realities of life propelled her to a recognizable image. Her abstract training and understanding of formal issues kept them entrenched in a basically abstract vocabulary. In this, her transition was somewhat similar to that of the Jane Street Group, although it occurred about a decade later. However, Beck was more drawn to narrative than Kresch, Bell, Blaine, or Matthiasdottir were. Matthiasdottir painted portraits of herself and her family, landscapes and still lifes, but they did not have a specifically narrative content. Blaine's interiors, landscapes and still lifes are similar. Kresch's landscapes are more about using light and color to evoke a scene rather than describe a specific time and place. Bell, although his paintings represented seemingly loaded domestic scenes, vehemently rejected iconographic or symbolic interpretation of his painting. In Chapter 1, I recounted a story that Beck told: at a panel discussion, she asked Bell if one of his paintings represented the "loss of innocence," and was met with "total, rejecting silence."¹²⁰ Beck noted that in art, one could find two categories of narrative painting: those works that utilized a "public" body of sources – literature, mythology, etc. The other category was more common in contemporary art: a "private" narrative, known only to the artist and based on his own life

¹²⁰ Rosemarie Beck, Untitled, undated lecture for a panel discussion on narrative painting. Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck.

or references. Beck considered Rembrandt “the ideal prototype” of the former category, and grouped Bell and Guston in the latter, noting that Guston, unlike Bell, welcomed discussion of his meaning.

Beck and Resika would meet around 1964, when both were showing at the Peridot Gallery. They felt a close affinity, even referring to each other as brother and sister. Beck seemed to echo some of Resika’s words (quoted earlier in this chapter), when she noted, “In the mid-fifties for an abstract painter to return to figuration was considered apostasy or madness or sheer perversity. But I guess I had to do what I thought was my real work, my untalented work. If it were to come to have meaning, it had to be earned by inches not yards, like carving a chain out of a block of wood.”¹²¹ Unlike Resika, Beck’s transition to figuration did not involve a period of technical study in the manner of the old masters, although she always remained involved with the history of art, and was especially drawn to Rembrandt. She seemed to find in Rembrandt a way to be a narrative painter who was still rooted in the formal. Like Matter, she also considered Cézanne her “teacher.” (Matter and Beck had first met at Guston’s home in the 1950s; they remained friends, and Beck later taught at New York Studio School.) Beck wrote about these influences and how they impacted her thinking on figurative painting:

Cézanne was my principal teacher. I was saturated with him; I’ve never been able to escape this influence. . . . My north node, however, is Rembrandt. Non purist, non academe. . . . He can strum across the entire keyboard, use everything and anything in the formal repository without repeating himself. . . . Besides he’s a dealer in psychological truths, a fact of no small concern to me but fruitful and important. I can say this now though I prated, along with members of my generation, about the visual arts’ responsibility to be about itself, about how, where, when, but not

¹²¹ Rosemarie Beck, Untitled, undated lecture on Beck’s education as a painter.

what. “What” was simply outside the categories. I think this position is cramping and undemanding...¹²²

Ultimately, Beck painted figuratively because she found narrative sources relevant. She was compelled to communicate truths of human existence, and figurative painting enabled her to do so. She expressed this succinctly, and it seems best to conclude with her own words on the subject:

I’ve been tiptoeing around here. The question is why paint myths and legends today. And the answer is obvious. We are absolutely hungry for subject now after the arid years of “Form Follows Function” and the greater aridity of art having to innovate and accommodate to philosophy rather than embody philosophy. We don’t even have any choice. ... I find myth erupting like a plague for we are not separate from these things. The eternal legends are still in us from Oedipus to Orpheus to the Cross. These are ... the perennial undercurrent of existence. They have to do with self and other, with loss and recovery, with stasis and metamorphosis.¹²³

Conclusion

This chapter details a transitional moment in several artists’ careers: a move from abstraction into representation. In the first chapter of this dissertation, we saw several artists come together around their education: the fundamental and influential ideas of Hans Hofmann. In this chapter, we see some of the same artists, plus others, branch out from their training, and begin to find their subject. Their abstract painting was in many ways a more theoretical response to art-making, while their entry into representation involved a more personal response. In this transition, the painters were motivated by a number of different forces and were mentored by several important older artists. The

¹²² Rosemarie Beck, Untitled, undated lecture for a panel discussion on drawing. Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck.

¹²³ Rosemarie Beck, Untitled, undated lecture for a panel discussion on narrative painting.

Jane Street Group, several of whom were Hofmann students, first banded together around the common cause of pure, geometric abstraction – influenced by theories of Neo-Plasticism, and groups such as Art Concret, and the American Abstract Artists.

Ultimately, however, this sort of abstraction was too limiting, and a personal curiosity about working from life meshed with their encounters with Jean Héliion, the avant-garde abstractionist-turned-figurative painter. Héliion’s painting gave them an example of how abstract principles of painting could be applied to a figurative framework. Matthiasdottir was perhaps the most comfortable and successful at this merger, early in her career. Her 1940s and 50s paintings show her assured style – bold, colorful masses marking figures and interiors, rich with evocation but painted with spare, minimal means.

Resika did not know the artists of the Jane Street Group during the years this chapter covers – the late 1940s and 1950s. He, independently, moved from the abstract painting motivated by his study with Hofmann, to figuration. Unlike the Jane Street Group, which was always steeped in European modernism, Resika looked to the past: Venetian and Baroque painting. Ironically, he learned his “technique” from an American – Edward Melcarth, a Social-Realist mural painter working in a Baroque style.

Matter, a student of Hofmann’s in the 1930s, approached the question of abstraction versus representation from a less rigid perspective, perhaps because she was steeped in painting from a young age, grew up around varying approaches, and cultivated artist friends and mentors as varied as Dickinson, Léger, de Kooning, and Calder. Still, her reaction to seeing a Giacometti exhibition in 1948 led to a dramatic shift in her work: one where perception, the devotion to a specific, unchanging still life, became paramount.

Matter was interested in “process” as an integral component of art-making – an idea in keeping with Abstract Expressionist theory. However, through her work and her writing, she would apply the concept of “process” to representational painting. Beck was nurtured as an abstract painter by Guston, Tomlin, and Motherwell, but by the late 1950s felt irrevocably pulled into representation. She was not led in this direction by any particular mentor; rather, her artistic identity was not fulfilled by abstraction. Her resulting figurative paintings became more narrative than those of most of the other artists discussed here.

Although these artists did not all know one another in the 1940s and 50s, they would eventually all become acquainted, and several close friendships would develop. This chapter began with the “door opened by Hofmann”: the artists were primed for full participation in the vanguard art world, and began their career with successes and promises of more. By the narrative end of this chapter, the artists had made a decision that would cause intense repercussions for their career. By choosing to work figuratively in an era of abstraction, they set themselves up to work against the grain. They had begun to find their true subject, but this meant moving away from the currents of their time.

CHAPTER THREE: FROM INSIDERS TO OUTSIDERS

The first two chapters of this dissertation provided insight into the formation of several New York figurative painters by examining their training with Hans Hofmann, and their shift into a representational style. These chapters examined the artists, their theory, and biography directly. This third chapter applies a different lens by looking at the artists through the perspective of critics and exhibitions. Thus, we learn about the artists as they were perceived by the New York art world. I continue, however, with the chronological progression established: Chapter 1 treated the artists' time with Hofmann in the early 1940s; the shift discussed in Chapter 2 occurred in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Now I move on to the late 1950s and 1960s.

In examining the period from about 1957 through the mid-1960s, I show how the reception of the painterly representational artists shifted from an inclusive view (they were considered part of a larger generation of painters, both abstract and figurative – and successors to the New York School) to an exclusive perception (they were progressively marginalized in the art world – excluded from major institutions, major galleries, and coverage by major art critics.) The New York art world changed in this period: more galleries were established, and as Pop Art took hold in the mid-1960s, it was important that movements were labeled and branded. I also discuss here the work of critics who found less polarity between abstraction and representation. If such responses had been more prevalent – or if Thomas Hess had simply lived longer – the artists might have continued to receive more widespread attention and recognition.

Thomas Hess and the “Second Generation”

Thomas Hess (1920-1978), the editor of *Art News* from 1946 until 1972, and author of books on abstraction, Barnett Newman, Willem de Kooning and Ad Reinhardt, is a central figure in this narrative. He championed the Abstract Expressionists but was not doctrinaire about the abstract mode. His enthusiasms and interests allowed for a capacity to appreciate and analyze figurative and even realist artists whom he considered serious and worthy. Part of this ability probably came out of the climate of the time – in the late 1950s these modes were not so regimented and Pop art had not yet claimed its hold on the art world. Many have classified Hess’s interests as “catholic.”¹

In 1957, Hess published a lengthy article in *Art News*, “U.S. Painting: Some Recent Directions,” essentially a treatise on the younger generation of New York painters.² This article codifies a moment of speculating on the directions American painting might take, following the radical unfolding of energy around Abstract Expressionism. “What is next?” was the question, and Hess answered it with intense exploration, analyzing the multiple forces that animated a younger generation of painters and their work. Hess was particularly adept at exploring artistic intent and generational stimuli, and at positioning and categorizing artists according to a variety of issues, rather than focusing on the outward appearance of artists’ work. Thus in this article he was able to position the figurative painters amongst peers who worked in different stylistic modes.

¹ Hilton Kramer wrote, “Mr. Hess’s interest in art was more esthetic than ideological, and thus more catholic and open-minded,” in “An Era in Art Comes to an End,” *New York Times*, 23 July 1978, D1. John Russell wrote, “Mr. Hess was an active champion of American painting and sculpture of the period since World War II and maintained long allegiances. . . that he formed in the 1940’s. But he retained an openness to new ideas,” in “Thomas Hess, Art Expert, Dies; Writer and Met Official Was 57,” *New York Times*, 14 July 1978, B2.

² Thomas Hess, “U.S. Painting: Some Recent Directions,” *Art News Annual* 25 (1956): 74-98, 174-180, 192-199.

Hess's article surveyed twenty-one artists, attempting to present the state of the New York art world and the direction of younger painters. His research included interviews and correspondence with the artists. He profiled three artists treated in this dissertation (Bell, Blaine, and De Niro), as well as Fairfield Porter, Seymour Chwast (a Hofmann student who painted realist landscapes in the Philadelphia environs), Gandy Brodie (whose work crossed the lines between abstraction and representation), more definitively abstract painters such as Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell, and Robert Rauschenberg, among several others. Here, the representational artists are treated completely within the context of the New York art world, not as outsiders, although they had already begun to work in a figurative mode. The piece serves, in this narrative, to ask the question "What if?": What if the lines between abstraction and figuration had not become so entrenched, and the artists were treated, institutionally, through a more variegated, complex lens. In this sense, Hess's writing becomes an interesting parallel to the theory of Hofmann presented in the first chapter. Where Hofmann's theory was open-ended and complex enough to allow a generation of students to transition into figuration, while retaining the basic principles he outlined, Hess's critical theory is multifaceted enough that they could be perceived in terms of issues other than a superficial stylistic reading.

Hess is described as a critic who had a profound personal respect and feeling for artists. Blaine wrote, after his death, "It is my feeling that Hess cared for the artists and their art more than any other writer in America."³ Resika recalled the generous way he would treat artists; he remembered Hess greeting him with sincere graciousness when he

³ Nell Blaine, Unpublished notes or draft of a letter written in response to Hilton Kramer's article about Thomas Hess's and Harold Rosenberg's death, "An Era in Art Comes to an End," *New York Times*, 23 July 1978, D1. Personal archives of Nell Blaine's estate, courtesy of Carolyn Harris.

visited a Monet exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum during Hess's tenure as curator.⁴ As the editor of *Art News*, he asked his writers to visit artists in their studios or homes before an exhibition under review opened. This was a practical tactic: it allowed reviews to be published simultaneously with the exhibitions, but it also forced writers to get to know the artists. Elaine de Kooning had a close relationship with Hess and wrote for *Art News* under his editorship, and told her sister, Marjorie Luyckx, about the effects of meeting the artist before reviewing the work. Luyckx wrote:

It was much more difficult to write about an artist's work if she went to the studio to view it instead of seeing it exposed on cold gallery walls. Seeing it in what was usually also the artist's living space, sometimes with his spouse and children present, and even sometimes under rather pathetic circumstances, made it difficult for her to separate the work from the life.⁵

Blaine recalled the importance of Hess's 1957 piece on the recent directions in painting:

That was an important article that changed my life. The publication had the respect of the art world for the level of its criticism, and also good quality reproductions... it was the first kind of national or international attention-getting piece, [that profiled] a number of the artists who later achieved a lot of attention [such as] Elaine de Kooning, Robert De Niro, and some other members of the Jane Street.⁶

For Blaine, the article, combined with the fact that she was newly exhibiting at Poindexter Gallery, marked a turning point in her career. In Elinor Poindexter, Blaine found a crucial and friendly supporter, and a "good, functioning," "commercial gallery dealer," who began to sell her work. It was a "long and continuing association" and

⁴ Paul Resika, in conversation with author, 2 February 2009.

⁵ Marjorie Luyckx, preface to *Elaine de Kooning: The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 12.

⁶ Nell Blaine, interview by Anne Skillion, 15 March 1979, transcript, Columbia University Oral History Office, New York, 101-102.

allowed her to begin to survive on gallery sales.⁷ (Blaine's relationship with Poindexter, and her gallery, will be discussed further in Chapter 5.)

In his article, Hess essentially sought to establish the background for an artistic community in New York, to outline the advent of Abstract Expressionism, its influence on a younger generation, and to categorize these younger artists according to several different principles. Hess himself outlined a combination of methodologies, which he utilized: formal, socio-historical, and a Malraux-influenced idea of a conversation with artists through history. The multiplicity of approaches allowed a complex view of the artists.

He traced the history of a New York art world and community back to the W.P.A., an involvement with Communism, and the establishment of Hofmann's school, the Club, and co-operative annual exhibitions on Ninth Street and the Stable Gallery. Hofmann was credited as a major influence on the artists (fifteen of the twenty-one painters discussed were students of Hofmann). Hess speculated on the effect Hofmann's teaching had on a younger generation of painters who were not as rigid about abstraction. Discussing how Hofmann's students worked from the model, he wrote, "It is almost as if Hofmann had planned an escape hatch from his system. Going 'back' to nature, the ex-student retains his professional artist's criteria; he can think of Corot or Delacroix or Rembrandt and keep his twentieth-century look (relative flatness, composition of 'negative' background areas, avoidance of tonal effects, etc.) in the back of his mind and his picture."⁸

⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁸ Hess, "U.S. Painting: Some Recent Directions," 95.

Hess believed that this generation had to “follow on the stage of public scrutiny the applause and catcalls which have greeted Abstract-Expressionism since 1940 [and] have chosen to enter quietly, playing down their gifts.”⁹ He found a difference between the younger artists and the elder painters in terms of ambition and a conversation with the public. In terms of the dominant practitioners, he proposed Pollock as a model of an “exclusive” concept of art-making, vitality and a revolutionary process, whereas de Kooning stood for a complicated heterogeneous process in which anything was possible and indeed one “must be able to do anything.”¹⁰ Three choices were available to this younger generation in terms of a response to Abstract Expressionism: they could join in, react against it, or ignore it altogether. Unlike the more revolutionary goals of their elders, Hess considered these artists part of a “G.I” culture, meaning many were recipients of government subsidies under the G.I. bill, and were given the opportunity to paint full time, study, and travel. Along with this culture came a rejection of volunteerism or high-minded goals, the artists did not try to reach a mass audience; rather, they cultivated an intimate dialogue.¹¹

Discussing what he found problematic about categorizing artists based on degrees of representation and verisimilitude, Hess stated, “it assumes, quite wrongly, that the most realist painter is most interested in the quality of *what* he is painting, and the most abstract painter is most concerned with the quality of *how* he is painting.” He believed that “the reverse is just as frequently true (for example, Derain was most interested in how he was painting any hill or flower; Mondrian was most concerned with what his

⁹ Ibid., 81.

¹⁰ Ibid., 98.

¹¹ Ibid., 174.

perpendiculars and primary colors meant in themselves).”¹² Instead, Hess found that a better categorical system involved evaluating their views of history, and opinions on historical necessity - whether the moment demands a certain style. According to Hess, some of these painters believed it did (Goodnough, Frankenthaler, Rauschenberg and others insisted on abstraction, while Remenick demanded realism); others emphasized that almost anything could and should be possible (Brodie, Goldberg, Elaine de Kooning, De Niro, Porter and others); while a third group found that the object represented has a distinct value and charge which should be part of the painting (Bell, Blaine, Kahn, and Solomon were placed in this group). Despite their views on history, Hess believed the artists were united by a belief in originality and expressing the self.¹³

They did not debate or choose sides among the old master painters, rather, they were interested in discovering lesser-known artists, Hess wrote. “They are very strict about the moderns, but have a connoisseur’s affection for all the past.” Although they had a diverse range of interests, Hess found that the artists “either by action or reaction, remain linked to the New York School.” Abstract Expressionism is inescapable; the American painter “seems born to his situation... and must “choose how to cope with it.” This was contrasted with American painting before 1940 in which artists chose from a hodge-podge of academic styles to forge their own way.¹⁴

Certain conventions of Abstract Expressionism were compared to their use among the younger generation, one being the practice of large-scale painting. Many of the younger artists continued the tradition. Similarly, Hess analyzed the importance given to draftsmanship in this generation. Some New York abstractionists had ruled out the

¹² Ibid., 176.

¹³ Ibid., 178-180.

¹⁴ Ibid., 194.

drawing stage in favor of immediacy in approaching the painting. However, others such as De Kooning and Gorky continued to emphasize drawing. Among the younger painters, the practice of drawing from nature was fundamental to Bell, Blaine, Goldberg, Elaine De Kooning, De Niro, Porter, Remenick, Rivers, and Solomon.¹⁵

In sum, Hess believed that the younger painters were forced to contend with Abstract Expressionism, but he found validity in a number of different responses, and he organized and categorized the responses on levels that transcend the outward appearance of the artwork. He did not consider that their diverse responses would isolate certain artists; he treated the young artists as a fairly cogent generation despite many differences.

Hess grouped Bell and Blaine together with those who insist on a “greater role for the subject,” and find it to have, “in itself, outside of art, a value, an electric charge or valence, which must be studied, isolated and brought back into the painting.” De Niro, however, was grouped with the artists who “emphasize the sanctity of Art,” who “cope transcendently with subject and pragmatically with style.” Hess said that with these artists, “Studies, sketches, and drawings make a net to capture form at its most representative of everything it can possibly represent: an arm becomes a line, a depth, a gesture, a spoke, a sign, a sorrow.”¹⁶ This description is quite applicable to De Niro’s work: he invested form with a metaphysical or expressionist quality, using a loose touch, which is the hallmark of his style, even in this early period.

In addition to the larger narrative, Hess included, for each artist, a separate brief biographical profile, along with three reproductions of their work. His intent was to capture a sense of the artist’s style, as well as his/her development. Trajectories from

¹⁵ Ibid., 196.

¹⁶ Ibid., 178.

abstraction to representation were traced in his pages on Blaine and Bell, whom Hess categorized as placing significant importance on the object represented. Blaine's painting, *White Creature*, 1945, an abstract painting which Hess noted is "close to Léger" was reproduced, as well as *From Watteau*, 1953, which he called a "Calligraphic figure painting – with an old-master motif," and *Interior with Blue Wall*, 1954: "Summertime painting from nature."¹⁷ With Bell, a similar path was traced through the reproductions, with a 1946 painting, *Family*, labeled as "Away from geometric abstraction," and *Study for Two Swedes*, 1955, as "Suggesting the figure and space around it."¹⁸

Under a reproduction of De Niro's painting, *Mantle with Plaster Cast and Black Fan*, 1954, was the caption: "Still-life as pure painting."¹⁹ It is clear that Hess thought of De Niro, and this painting in particular, as an example of continuities possible stemming from Abstract Expressionism. Here was a painter who could use still life as an occasion to paint "purely," with the focus on the gesture and spontaneous approach and the effects of wet paint on canvas. This type of progression and possibility in a nascent generation is what interested Hess as a critic writing on the new directions New York painting was taking.

Artists of the New York School: Second Generation at the Jewish Museum, 1959

In 1959, De Niro was included in a Jewish Museum exhibition, also devoted to the subject of a "second generation" of New York School painters.²⁰ Several other painterly figurative artists were amongst the group, such as Grace Hartigan, Lester

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁰ *The New York School: Second Generation: Paintings by Twenty-three artists*, Jewish Museum, New York, March 10 - April 28 1957.

Johnson, Gandy Brodie, Elaine de Kooning, Hyde Solomon, and Jan Müller. Also included were artists working in a more abstract, gestural framework like Milton Resnick and Joan Mitchell, as well as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Entitled “Artists of the New York School: Second Generation,” it was selected by Horace Richter, with the assistance of Meyer Schapiro, and a catalogue essay was authored by Leo Steinberg. The Jewish Museum exhibition is interesting because, like Hess’s article, it grouped artists working in different modes together, under the common heading of “second generation” of the New York School.

De Niro’s career was flourishing. As noted previously, he had been shown by Peggy Guggenheim in 1946. By the early 1950s he was exhibiting at the prestigious Egan Gallery, where New York school painters such as De Kooning, McNeil, and Kline were also shown. By 1951, he had attracted the attention of Hess, who wrote, in an *Art News* review of his exhibition at Egan, “[De Niro] must now be ranked among the best of the younger artists to have emerged from anonymity.” Hess also noted:

A distinct sensibility is felt at work... Working on ambitiously large surfaces, with an ambitious technique, De Niro succeeds in keeping every inch of the canvas alive – spinning the spokes of a parasol with yellow gashes; letting purples or oranges cascade down or push up and across a studio interior. The result is a feeling of luxury, poise and affable richness, combined with a sort of nervous impetuosity, that is more than a proof of maturity.²¹

Reproduced with the review was De Niro’s painting, *Moroccan Women* (fig. 3.1). The “distinct sensibility” that Hess notes is a mark of De Niro’s personal style, which made itself known even at his young age of 28.

²¹ Thomas Hess, “Robert De Niro,” *Art News* 49 (February 1951): 49.

The starting point for *Moroccan Women* was a photograph by Karl Bissenger from *Flair* magazine of five figures in an architectural setting. De Niro would revisit this motif in numerous paintings and a suite of lithographs over the next three decades. The subject references his painter-heroes Delacroix and Matisse, although it is not an homage to a specific painting. In this 1951 painting, we witness De Niro finding both a subject and a style that would endure. We see the beginnings of his trademark black outlines demarcating figures, a gestural application of paint, broad areas of “empty” whitish space and a brusquely delineated architectural ground into which figures nearly melt and dissolve. In later versions, like the 1983 version (fig. 3.2), De Niro’s painting became more “refined” – his touch more calligraphic and less slashing. Still, it is remarkable for a painter’s course—and specifically, his source material—to be set and available to him to refine and develop so early in his career. The 1951 painting, although bound to tradition in the sense of its subject matter – the “exotic” of the 19th century – could also be placed firmly in a New York School context, because of the paint handling and execution. The slashing contrasts of blacks, whites, and neutrals evoke painters like de Kooning and Alfred Leslie. This affinity to Abstract Expressionism was the subtext of Hess’s description of De Niro’s work, and it allowed Hess to establish continuity between the younger artist and the previous generation.

By De Niro’s next show at Egan, he was referred to in the press as a “younger hero” by Henry McBride, who noted that “considerable numbers of the [younger set] turned out for his opening and were visibly impressed.” Using similar language to Hess, McBride described De Niro’s “slashing, challenging, impetuous, overwhelming technique.” He also noted the “breadth and massiveness of the treatment” and the fact

that although they have subject matter, his paintings are “not bothered with enough detail to anguish the extreme modernists.”²² The energy around De Niro’s work and career continued to be evident in the next several years: Frank O’Hara wrote of his 1955 Egan show that De Niro “is one of the most original and powerful younger painters showing today, and each show of his is an event. Like many other artists of major ambition he paints against what he dislikes, as well as with an intrinsic drive.” Again, O’Hara did not see De Niro’s subject matter and technique as contradictory, writing “A large crucifixion develops a free plasticity,” and that a still life “is an original and moving addition to the tradition of ‘grand still lifes,’ definite and yet suggestive, waywardly pressed and stroked into form but arriving at classical coolness.”²³ By 1958, James Schuyler was calling De Niro “one of our leading Expressionists” noting his “style is so personal,” and highlighting one aspect of it: how the “rapidity of the paint, arbitrariness of color and form, express a single, though cumulative, vision.” He also wrote that “elements [line, tone and color] can always be grasped both as themselves and as a part of what they compose.”²⁴ In the period, De Niro’s work was admired by the press (and other artists) as a personal, powerful example of working within the innovations of the New York School but incorporating some traditions of representation. It is likely these qualities that led it to be chosen for exhibitions like the one at the Jewish Museum, while the other artists treated in this dissertation were left out.

In his catalogue essay for the Jewish Museum exhibition, *Artists of the New York School: Second Generation*, Leo Steinberg outlined similar qualities in the work of the exhibition at large. Steinberg discussed the raw qualities of brushstrokes, the emphasis on

²² Henry McBride, “Younger Hero,” *Art News* 52 (Summer 1953): 56, 71.

²³ Frank O’Hara, “Robert De Niro,” *Art News* 54 (March 1955): 53.

²⁴ James Schuyler, “Robert De Niro,” *Art News* 57 (November 1957): 12.

the physical surface, the energy, and lack of finish. His essay assumed a fluidity between abstraction and figuration echoed by other important critics in these years.

Steinberg's essay also focused on the psychological issues that affected artists working in the immediate trail of Abstract Expressionism and how these issues affected painting. Underplaying differences between realism and abstraction, he in fact suggested a blurring of lines, stating, "most of these younger painters insist that even their abstract pictures have a representational content. The point is rather that, where a painting is more or less clearly representational, the image is to be guessed at or ferreted out, and the relation between the theme and the visible form remains paradoxical, inharmonious."²⁵ Most importantly, Steinberg contended that this generation had nothing left to rebel against – a difficult legacy. With theatrical language, Steinberg suggested that a century-long series of rebellions left the field completely open – anything was possible in painting, nothing was left to challenge. He wrote, "there's nothing to do but to tamp down the debris and build anew with found rubble."²⁶ Steinberg also suggested that debates on abstraction were moot at this point in time: "The battles for and against modern art, for and against abstraction, are cold issues by now... our task is only to acknowledge the positive content that resides in these paintings."²⁷ Steinberg's point is somewhat similar to Hess's contention that the younger generation was bound to the New York School, but Steinberg was a great deal more dramatic about the consequences of inheriting a field in which rebellion was exhausted.

²⁵ Leo Steinberg, introduction to *The New York School: second generation: paintings by twenty-three artists*. Exh. cat. (New York: Jewish Museum, 1957), 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

Hess, in fact, authored a response to the Jewish Museum show, in an article that also discussed two other simultaneous exhibitions of “younger” artists at the Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum.²⁸ While Hess noted that critics of the time had been recently – and enthusiastically – proclaiming an end to Abstract Expressionism, Hess contradicted this response, finding instead a valid continuity and further exploration of style in the younger generation. He wrote, “‘Abstract-Expressionism has died!’ is the cheery cry from an increasing number of commentators—who always felt that it had been born to bring the blush of shame to the manly cheeks of America, anyhow...[These critics] ‘hail a return to Nature, to decencies, religions, moralities...’”²⁹ Hess, in contrast, found continuity not only in artists continuing to work in an abstract vein, but also those working in a figurative one. This response was often in line with the artists’ own belief systems and experience.

Hess astutely defined the word “style” as two-fold: first, the “Manner” of a painting as it relates to other paintings of a certain time, place, and situation; and, second, the “Style” of a painting that is distinctly the artist’s own. Using this definition, Hess wrote about the diverse ways that artists in the Jewish Museum exhibition had furthered the innovations of Abstract Expressionism. Sometimes the artist’s personal “Style” was close to the larger “Manner” of the New York school, yet retained its own identity (as in the work of Alfred Leslie). In others (Robert Rauschenberg, Lester Johnson), “Style” was far from “Manner” but still related to common issues.³⁰ He wrote of De Niro’s

²⁸ Thomas Hess, “Younger Artists and the Unforgivable Crime,” *Art News* 56 (April 1957): 46-49, discussed three exhibitions: *The New York School: Second Generation: Paintings by Twenty-Three Artists*, Jewish Museum, New York, *Recent American Acquisitions*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 13-April 21, 1957, and *Young America 1957: Thirty American Painters and Sculptors under 35*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

²⁹ Thomas Hess, “Younger artists and the unforgivable crime,” 46-47.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

finding motifs in popular material like movie stills, and “endow[ing] a muscle-bound armature of form with a bittersweet presence that is all the more ironic for its monumentality.” In other words, Hess was able to perceive De Niro’s application of the structure and vocabulary of New York painting to figuration, and the effects that it had on meaning. He continues, “You realize from this exhibition that the Manner of modern American art has just begun, and that the tragedy of Jackson Pollock’s death, which so profoundly moved the art-world, marks a beginning, not an end to the period.”³¹ Hess’s article was a profoundly optimistic one – sensing possibility for expansion in many different directions. For him, Abstract Expressionism was not a unique, solitary triumph; the New York art world would continue to blossom. Figuration was not a departure but an obvious and inevitable variation of style. It was an outlook that differed tremendously from the ones that would be expressed in response to group exhibitions of figuration just a few years later. By the mid-1960s, figuration was codified as its own completely separate language.

This more polarizing attitude was a continuation of the 19th century battle between modernists and traditionalists. In the Hegelian reading of art history, where each movement was considered a step forward – towards abstraction, figuration was distinctly perceived as retrograde. Furthermore, it was increasingly tied to a politically reactionary attitude. This position was expressed in the influential 1981 article by Benjamin Buchloh, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting.”³² Buchloh framed the European “return to representation” following the First World War entirely in socio-political terms,

³¹ Ibid., 49, 64.

³² Benjamin Buchloh. “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,” *October* 16 (1981): 39-68.

considering it a “regression,” and a product of political oppression and authoritarianism, resulting in “mimetic modes” that reflect “anonymity and passivity.” He saw “melancholy... at the origin of the allegorical mode,” and believed that “this melancholy is enforced by prohibition and repression.” Buchloh positioned the *Neue Sachlichkeit* painters as apolitical—instead they were “humanitarian”—and thus in line with the desires of a “newly reconstituted upper middle class” after the First World War, desiring “an art that would provide spiritual salvation from the daily experience of alienation resulting from the dynamic reconstruction of postwar capitalism.” Buchloh’s attack has infiltrated academic perceptions of representational painting, but it is a problematic construct, because it positions the artist’s responsibility as entirely political, because it so radically limits the possibilities for politically engaged art, and because it so definitively accepts a teleological view of art history.³³

Interesting, nonetheless, is that the art discussed here also shifted in a post-war period – in this case post-World War II. In his survey article, Hess had characterized this second generation as somewhat politically removed, terming it the “G.I. culture.” Also true is the notion that these painters were concerned with “personal expression” – an individual response to nature. However, many of these painters embraced progressive politics in their personal life even if their art did not always speak to political issues. Certainly the economic argument Buchloh made (that representational art was designed to appeal to the upper-middle class) did not apply to this generation of American painters, who were less successful as figurative painters than they might have been as

³³ In the introduction to Rose-Carol Washton Long and Maria Mekela, eds., *Of ‘Truths Impossible to Put in Words’: Max Beckmann Contextualized* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), Long and Makela discuss the problematic association of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and conservatism, and the political content in Beckmann’s figuration.

abstractionists. While in a pre-World War I Europe, abstraction was considered a more “universal” language, these painters actually came to consider abstraction a limited, rigid mode of expression (an issue I discussed in Chapter 2). Ironically, it was actually constructs like Buchloh’s (or more relevantly, Greenberg’s) that seemed “authoritarian” to the painters, who wanted to be free to paint whatever they chose. Georges, in particular, was vocal about this issue – no one should limit artistic possibility.

Equating these painters with the German expressionist tendency is also problematic since their art bears little stylistic resemblance to the Germans. However, nationally and internationally, after the Second World War, some figurative art was developing that did bear a relationship to the German tendency; this aesthetic would be explored in two exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art.

**Two Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art:
*New Images of Man, 1959, and Recent Paintings U.S.A.: The Figure, 1962***

New Images of Man

The next major museum exhibition to treat figuration would not include any of the artists central to this dissertation. It is discussed here because it was a provocative and important exhibition of representational painting that contributed to the defining of lines between abstraction and figuration. *New Images of Man*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1959, was curated by Peter Selz, and was accompanied by a lengthy exhibition catalogue that he authored, with an introduction and individual entries on artists in the show.³⁴ It was controversial, received harshly critical reviews, but nevertheless was quite influential. In fact, the exhibition continues to be discussed today:

³⁴ Peter Selz, *New Images of Man*, Exh. cat., (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959).

a gallery exhibition held in the summer of 2008 entitled *No Images of Man* included several artists from the original show, along with more contemporary artists, and a brochure essay discussing the legacy of the 1959 show.³⁵ And in 1994, two articles in *Art Journal* revisited the exhibition, one by Paul Raverly, analyzing its reception and theoretical grounding; the other an interview with Selz in which he reflected on the show.³⁶

Selz, a scholar of German Expressionism and curator at MoMA from 1958-1965, based the exhibition around his belief that this art emerged from a Post-War feeling of anguish and dread: the human situation / predicament is central to the artists' work, as opposed to formal structure. Thus, Selz's choices were centered on "expressionist" treatments of the figure, and in line with his scholarly interests (see figs. 3.3 - 3.5). The exhibition was not limited to New York artists; it was international in scope. It also encompassed a great deal of sculptural work in addition to painting. It included Karel Appel, Francis Bacon, Alberto Giacometti, Jean Dubuffet, Bay Area figurative painters such as Richard Diebenkorn and Nathan Oliveira, and Chicago-school painters such as James McGarrell, as well as Leon Golub, Pollock, de Kooning, and Jan Müller, among others. Selz's position and outlook differed strongly from New York school theory and writers such as Hess, as we can see in the following statement:

These images are often frightening in their anguish. They are created by artists who are no longer satisfied with "significant form" or even the boldest act of artistic expression. They are perhaps aware of the mechanized barbarism of a time which, notwithstanding Buchenwald and Hiroshima, is engaged in the preparation of even greater violence in which the globe is to be the target....In many ways these artists are inheritors of

³⁵ *No Images of Man: An Exhibition Curated by Mitchell Albus*, Sandra Gering Gallery, New York, June 25 – August 22, 2008.

³⁶ Dennis Raverly, "Critical Perspectives on 'New Images of Man,'" and Joan Marter, "Recollections of 'New Images of Man': An Interview with Peter Selz," *Art Journal* (Winter 1994): 62-65.

the romantic tradition. The passion, the emotion, the break with both idealistic form and realistic matter, the trend towards the demoniac and cruel, the fantastic and imaginary – all belong to the romantic movement which, beginning in the eighteenth century, seems never to have stopped.³⁷

Similarly, Selz claimed “these imagists take the human situation, indeed the human predicament rather than formal structure, as their starting point. Existence rather than essence is of the greatest concern to them.”³⁸ Selz’s approach was even more distinctly framed by the preface in the exhibition catalogue, written by Paul Tillich, the German refugee scholar of Existentialism. Tillich demands, “When in abstract or non-objective painting and sculpture, the figure disappears completely, one is tempted to ask, what has happened to man?” He continues, “The image of man became transformed, distorted, disrupted and it finally disappeared in recent art. But as in the reality of our lives, so in its mirror of the visual arts, the human protest arose against the fate to become a thing.”³⁹ Thus, Tillich and Selz dramatically established abstraction / representation as a dichotomy equaling a shifting world view from dehumanization to a fight for humanity regained. This is a problematic equation, since abstraction is not necessarily devoid of humanistic content.⁴⁰ Hofmann’s own work and his teaching are just one example in which the abstraction is actually derived from a deep appreciation of the human presence and nature’s presence. The exhibition was criticized, but never directly for this construct.

Selz, and the Museum, however, were critiqued for over-dramatizing the grotesque, horrific aspects of the show, for wishing (and failing) to protest Abstract-Expressionism, and for willfully misreading the intent of artists. John Canaday, in the *New York Times*, sarcastically remarked that he “was hardly frightened at all” by the

³⁷ Peter Selz, introduction to *New Images of Man*, 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁹ Paul Tillich, preface to *New Images of Man*, 9.

⁴⁰ This issue is discussed by Dennis Raverty in “Critical Perspectives on ‘New Images of Man.’”

content of the art – advertised “as an art spectacular... having to do with corruption of the flesh and brutalization of the spirit.” More seriously, Canaday noted that “The new imagists are not a school... [and] by no means all are concerned with anguish and decay.”⁴¹ Manny Farber, in *Art News*, concluded:

In essence, “New Images” is a protest against the Abstract Expressionists, who practically own the purchasers’ wallets because they have academicized the fireworks of a surface devoid of imagery. Nevertheless, the whole intent of this Museum effort ... is made ridiculous by the inclusion of Pollock and de Kooning... A majority of the other works are either unresolved abstractions taking a brief shortcut into realism or realistic works hopelessly indebted to the inventions of Abstract-Expressionism.⁴²

In short, Farber noted that the work in this exhibition was not as distant from abstraction as Selz might wish.

It is in fact clear that Selz perceived the exhibition as a challenge to the dominant art movement. Decades later, in an interview about the exhibition Selz recalled that “at that time the exhibition created fierce debates. The singularity of Abstract Expressionism – a movement I valued highly but not exclusively – was being challenged at MoMA.”⁴³ Selz’s perspective was radically different, for instance, from that of Hess, who preferred to find continuity as opposed to revolution among a younger generation.

In any case, the artists discussed in this dissertation did not fit into Selz’s model of a “new” figuration; they did not come to representation out of an existentialist despair or longing. It was more an inevitability due to their interest in the perceptual experience and a desire to be in conversation with art history. Furthermore, despite the figuration present in their paintings, formal issues remained primary. While Selz writes that the

⁴¹ John Canaday, “Art: New Images of Man,” *New York Times*, 30 September 1959, p. 40.

⁴² Manny Farber, “New images of (ugh) man,” *Art News* 58 (October 1959): 39, 58.

⁴³ Peter Selz, in Joan Marter, “Recollections of ‘New Images of Man’: An Interview with Peter Selz,” 65.

human predicament as opposed to formal structure was the *New Images* artists' starting point, the opposite is true for artists like Bell, Kresch and Matthiasdottir. Their exclusion from a high-profile show like this may have contributed somewhat to their outsider status – even as figurative artists they were outside of the institutional construct of figuration. More importantly, however, a show like *New Images of Man* served to divide the younger practitioners into categories of figurative versus abstract, so their reception was dominated by issues of image-making, as opposed to process, technique, and formal structure.

Recent Painting U.S.A.: The Figure

The 1962 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *Recent Painting U.S.A.: The Figure*, was a more open-ended exhibition, compared to Selz's tightly constructed show; but it too, perpetuated the theoretical path that figurative painting was a radical departure from abstraction.⁴⁴ It was dominated by a similar aesthetic: the isolated, existential vision of the human figure (see figs. 3.6 – 3.7). *Recent Painting* was limited to Americans, however. The exhibition was organized by the museum's Junior Council, and works were chosen out of a call for submissions. Only works executed between 1958 and 1962 were eligible. The museum received about 9500 entries; from this group, museum curators Dorothy Miller, William Lieberman, and Frank O'Hara made an initial selection, and Alfred Barr, the director, made a final selection – 74 artists, who were each represented by one painting. Of artists treated in this dissertation, De Niro was the only one included. Richard Lindner, Paul Wonner, Sidney Goodman, Elaine de Kooning,

⁴⁴ *Recent Painting U.S.A.: The Figure*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 23, 1962 – September 4, 1962, traveling exhibition, November 1962 through November 1963.

Leon Golub, Lester Johnson. Nathan Oliviera, Larry Rivers, and Tom Wesselman were also among the 74.

Barr's catalogue essay was not as didactic as Selz's: he claimed little to no commonality among the artists. He wondered about the variety, speculating, "It is probable that never before, within one time and one country, has the human figure been painted with the prodigious variety of forms even this small exhibition suggests."⁴⁵ Barr, however, claimed that the artists were something of heroic renegades to attempt figurative work, and it is with this type of claim that the exhibition declares the lines between abstraction and representation. He wrote:

These human figures were painted in a period (a glorious period in American art) when the painted surface often functioned in virtual and even dogmatic independence of any represented image. Some of these pictures suggest uncertainty as to whether a painting in the 1960s can or cannot, should or should not, live by paint alone. Others seem more confident. Ambiguous or decisive, more strength to them!⁴⁶

These lines were basically a call-to-arms: be confident working against the grain - with the implication that figuration is certainly against the grain. One of the most interesting responses to the 1962 MoMA exhibition was authored by Fairfield Porter, whose writing will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Porter began his review by quoting the Museum's statement of purpose in this exhibition: "exploring recent directions in one aspect of American painting: the renewed interest in the human figure."⁴⁷ Porter countered that this was an institutional and press-driven construct, not an artistic reality, writing:

⁴⁵ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., introduction to *Recent Painting U.S.A.: The Figure*. Exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art), 1962).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Press release for *Recent Painting U.S.A.: The Figure*, announcing the second stage of the selection process, July 23 1961. Exhibition files, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

Since painters have never stopped painting the figure, and since the exhibition shows no change on the part of particular painters from a non-objective to a figurative style, it could be said to represent a renewed interest in the figure on the part of critics and the audience rather than among painters.⁴⁸

The theme of Porter's piece is the idea of a race between the art and the criticism. Is the art a direct expression of its maker, or is the artist merely following a critic's idea of what is demanded in the current moment? Porter wondered about the history of American figure painting in this way – who has painted or would paint the figure “without affectation, sentimentality or evasiveness, and who do not follow criticism, but precede it.” He found the history problematic, and felt that, in fact, “A movement toward painting the figure will be new, not renewed. It will be the first time American painters have tackled the problem directly.”⁴⁹ He pointed to Elaine de Kooning and Richard Lindner, included in the exhibition, as examples of artists who precede criticism and face experience directly, but he regretted the exclusion of Alex Katz and Georges, who he believed were making pure and original work.

Dore Ashton, writing a review of the exhibition in *The Studio*, also recognized the problems of an equation in which figurative painting is considered a new or revived phenomenon. She wrote:

In the periodic sieges of soul-searching, both among abstract and figurative painters, it has always struck me that the problem of the human figure is never far from the thoughts of any painter. If there is one central conflict common to all painters, it exists in the tension between the thousands of years of figure-painting and sixty years of abstraction... Polemicists may beat the drum all they like, but they will never succeed in creating a 'new' problem.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Fairfield Porter, “Exhibition Preview: Recent Painting USA: The Figure,” *Art in America* 50 (1962): 78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁰ Dore Ashton, “What About the Human Figure?” *The Studio* 164 (August 1962): 68.

Ashton found a problem similar to the one Porter raised among this group of contemporary painters: an evasive tendency – a lack of soul-searching, a feeling of anonymity. Her critique and Porter’s may stem from the literary tendency that this show and *New Images of Man* also tended to: painting derived from an idea about mankind and the figure, rather than pure painterly or naturalistic work. This aesthetic and world-view is completely distinct from that of the artists treated in this dissertation.

The selection method of the MoMA show had its implications and repercussions. Barr’s claim of “variety,” together with the more “democratic” method of a submission-based, juried exhibition, was viewed by some as forced and insincere. Sidney Tillim (a critic, and a painter whose oeuvre encompassed both abstraction and figuration), authored a review of the exhibition that was essentially a harsh institutional critique.⁵¹ In it, Tillim accused the museum of offering a half-hearted and flawed endorsement of figurative painting. He criticized the museum’s self-serving agenda: looking to promote the “new” thing, which was still identifiably modern and therefore fashionable. He found that the museum looked for art to serve a program mapped-out *a priori*, thus deliberately misunderstanding the artists’ intention. Furthermore, they were unable to identify good art. They did not admit their true intentions and, in this show, weeded out thousands of artists, all under the false guise of a democratic or “liberal” selection. He suggested that in the MoMA exhibition “one is reminded of Social Realism . . . because in Social Realism the message obscures or distorts plastic structure and organization.”⁵² He also wrote of the clichés found in the paintings included – deliberate attempts to extend Abstract Expressionism into figuration, and what he terms the “Leonard Baskin

⁵¹ Sidney Tillim, “Waiting for Giotto,” *Arts Magazine* 36 (September 1962): 40-43.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 40.

Syndrome” - characterized by “a bloated figurative image that can alternately signify corruption or despair- but which invariably corrupts the sense of form.”⁵³ In this, Tillim also was noting the aesthetic that pervaded both this show and *New Images of Man*: that existentialist, literary vision of the figure. Tillim accused Barr’s judgment of being so clouded by these clichés that they “confuse illustration with painting.” In order to maintain a “program of continuous revolution... what the museum has done is to separate the revolution from the artist and made the artist a function of art and style.”⁵⁴ And, calling Barr “long a midwife to the new in art,” he criticized the hypocrisy of such a dramatic selection process (choosing 74 artists from 9500 submissions), under the false auspices of a democratic “liberalism” in which “Here, so to speak, was the Figure regardless of race, creed and color, as if anything else, anything more exclusive, would be reactionary.”⁵⁵ Tillim suspected that “the exhibition, in part, was adapted to make amends to painters and a type of painting officially neglected during Abstract Expressionism’s golden age.”⁵⁶ He considered the “variety” that Barr espoused merely a cover-up for an exhibition in which “errors of both omission and commission are the rule.”⁵⁷ He concluded his review by noting the “boycott” response exhibition at Kornblee, which included many painters whose absence he found regrettable in the MoMA show – like Porter, Alex Katz, Philip Pearlstein, and Paul Georges.

Figures, at Kornblee, included twenty-three New York figurative painters, several of whom were rejected from the Modern show, although six artists were represented in both (Robert Beauchamp, John Button, Elaine de Kooning, Robert De Niro, Lester

⁵³ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 42.

Johnson, and Nicholas Marsicano).⁵⁸ Georges recalled the circumstances of the exhibition, “The Museum of Modern Art had a show of figurative art which they left us out of, and so we had a protest show. All the painters making representational art who were well known were in that show [like] Alex Katz and Philip Pearlstein.”⁵⁹ The Kornblee exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue essay written by Jack Kroll. Included at Kornblee were Blaine, De Niro, and Georges, as well as Porter, Alex Katz, Alice Neel, Philip Pearlstein, Larry Rivers, and others. It demonstrated, generally, a different aesthetic from the MoMA show. Many paintings demonstrated continuity with Abstract Expressionism, like Robert Goodnough and Charles Cajori. Indeed, in the exhibition catalogue, Jack Kroll wrote, “now we have a figurative art which continues abstract art” – a response quite distinct from Barr’s call to arms. The exhibition also focused more on an intimate experience with and straightforward response to the subject – as in De Niro’s *Seated Woman* and Paul Georges’s *Nude at Dinner Table* (fig. 3.8). It included naturalistic painting, like Porter’s *On the Porch* (fig. 3.9), whereas the MoMA paintings notably lacked naturalism.

The Tillim article, though quite harsh in its evaluation of the Museum’s intentions, brought to light a number of important issues. It delineated the cross-purposes of the Museum and the individual artist. While the artists treated in this dissertation approached their figurative painting in much the same way as they did abstraction, focusing on formal issues, the museum looked for more literary approaches in which the concept and meaning of the image was central. Following the crest of Abstract Expressionism, the museums were likely faced with the dilemma of what would follow.

⁵⁸ *Figures*, Kornblee Gallery, New York, May 21 – June 15, 1962.

⁵⁹ Paul Georges, interview by author, March 16, 2000.

The perception of art history as an inevitable march through styles and revolutions was an accepted and entrenched way of looking at art. The Museum had a certain pressure to present the newest thing, as well as to appease and appeal to those who hoped that Abstract Expressionism had ceased, and a new period of figuration returned. The theories that Hess had espoused in his 1956 *Art News* article—presenting the second generation as exemplars of continuity rather than revolution—was probably unsatisfying from a museum and marketing-based standpoint. This period – the late 1950s and early 1960s – was problematic because no clear successor to Abstract Expressionism had yet emerged. It would be about 1963 when Pop Art definitively made its presence known. This new movement was, in effect, an answer to the institutional problem. This shift is quite clear when we examine the response to an exhibition of figurative painters held the following year, in 1963, at Knoedler Galleries. The responses to this exhibition, which included four artists treated in this dissertation, show how much the artists were by this point perceived as outsiders.

Five American Painters at Knoedler Galleries, 1963

In 1963, an exhibition at Knoedler Galleries opened. Entitled *Five American Painters*, it was conceived as an alternative to a Pop Art exhibition at Sidney Janis Gallery, located across the street from Knoedler.⁶⁰ Leslie Katz, a writer and art collector who had been the publisher of *Arts Magazine* in the 1950s and would found Eakins Press in 1966, was requested by Knoedler to select this invitational group show. Katz, in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, wrote:

⁶⁰ *Five American Painters*, Knoedler Gallery, New York, September 16 – September 30, 1963.

The five painters selected for this exhibit are individuals who for more than a decade have been keeping their own counsel and following their own bent apart from the fashions of the moment... [artists who] have never succumbed to [the] theoretical canon demanding of art that it illustrate ideologies of society... They employ no tricks, practice no self-immolation in ideas, find no security in formula.... They are original, and affirm revolution, in their impulse not to destroy, but to sustain the abiding value of freedom of conscience as the first condition of honest form.⁶¹

Five American Painters at Knoedler was a key moment for the artists included:

Bell, Blaine, De Niro, Matthiasdottir, and Hyde Solomon. It reunited four members of the Jane Street Group (discussed in Chapter 2). Each artist was represented by eight to ten works, allowing a varied and relatively comprehensive look at their production. The exhibition was held outside of their regular gallery (Bell and Matthiasdottir were beginning their relationship with the newly opened Schoelkopf Gallery; Blaine was shown by Tibor de Nagy; Solomon by Poindexter; and De Niro by Zabriskie). The Knoedler exhibition was both a commercial and critical success.

In his catalogue essay, Leslie Katz set the stage for the critical reception of this show by emphasizing the individualistic nature of the artists. He implicitly referred to Pop Art when he wrote, “Contemporary taste and judgment are being tyrannized (not to say corrupted) by the modern superstition that for a work of art to be significant, form and content must appear compulsive or dictated ...[and] must glorify the disembodied.”⁶² He established the artists as separate from contemporary trends. He also asserted that their art practices were based in the entirety of a career, and a lifetime of decisions as opposed to momentary fashions by writing, “The much abused idea of ‘the moment of truth’ may turn out to be the big lie of our time. Truth is not a moment alone or the

⁶¹ Leslie Katz, introduction to *Five American Painters*. Exh. cat. (New York: Knoedler, 1963).

⁶² Ibid.

creation of a moment, but of years, the aggregate of innumerable influences, decisions, commitments.”⁶³

In the Knoedler exhibition, Bell was represented by a variety of paintings, including group portraits, like two versions of *La Maison Tellier*, *Study for Croquet Party*, and *Vins et Liquors*, 1962-63 (fig. 3.10). He also showed two self portraits, both from 1961, and a painting entitled *Family* – an early version of his “Family Group” series, which he developed, and would evolve in dozens of paintings until the end of his life. With the *Family* paintings and the self portraits, in particular, Bell found his own voice as a painter, as well as themes and compositional arrangements that would endure throughout his career. The *Family* paintings mark the beginning of Bell’s fully utilizing dramatic figural postures in a complex dance to create meaning, movement, and rhythm. An early study dated 1962 (fig. 3.11) shows three figures grouped near a tabletop with a fruit bowl and reacting to the presence of a butterfly hovering amidst them. This work, and his later *Morning* series, as several art historians have noted, reflect his interest in Balthus, in the smooth curves of the bodies and specifically the presence of the butterfly, as in Balthus’s painting *The Moth*, 1959-60.⁶⁴ Over his career, Bell would abandon the larger figural groups we find in the larger compositions like *Maison Tellier* and *Vins et Liquors*, and focus on groups of two or three figures. By centering his attention on the nuclear family unit in these paintings, he achieved an intensity of relationships, both psychological as well as formal, in terms of the arrangement of planes, curves, color, positive and negative space, which is all tightly constructed and planned. In the self-

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ This is discussed by Martica Sawin, in her essay, “Leland Bell: The Formative Years,” and Steven Harvey, “Under Pressure: Leland Bell’s Late Figure Groups,” both in *Changing Rhythms: Works by Leland Bell, 1950s-1991*. Exh. cat. (Swarthmore, Pennsylvania: List Gallery, Swarthmore College, 2001), 13, 24.

portraits (see fig. 3.12), Bell used an emotionally provocative image and explore the facets and nuances of the head and face.

Matthiasdottir was represented in the Knoedler exhibition by a painting of rooftops in Paris: *Roofs, rue Antoine Bourdelle*, 1962 (fig. 3.13), painted from observation during her trip with Bell to Paris in 1962, as well as several portraits of their daughter Temma (see fig. 3.14), and a still life. As in Bell's *Family* painting, we see the beginnings of Matthiasdottir's enduring concerns and style in her landscape painting. Emphasis is placed on the meetings of strong angular forms within a complex vista. These same issues would animate her later paintings of Iceland. Here, though, her touch is looser and brushier, her colors paler. Both Bell and Matthiasdottir would develop more highly keyed compositions with more strongly delineated forms in the 1970s and 1980s. Unlike Bell's work of the same period, the paintings of Temma are more rapidly worked, and were most likely completed in one sitting. Although the placement of form is important, they do not have the obsessive deliberation that would motivate Bell's work and career. Both artists, however, found, in this period, the charge that animates the theme of the nuclear family unit and the domestic setting.

The Criticism of Lawrence Campbell

Of those who reviewed the Knoedler show, Lawrence Campbell (1914-1984) was the most comprehensive in his attempt to establish the artists historically, and he also used the occasion to analyze the individual aesthetic – the artistic “personality” – of each artist included. Campbell wrote art criticism for almost forty years, publishing hundreds of articles in *Art News*, *Art in America*, and other publications. He maintained,

throughout his career, a close association with the Art Students League where he had studied painting in 1946, and he taught at Brooklyn College and Pratt Institute. At the Art Students League, he edited the school's newsletter, wrote and designed its catalogues, and was so conversant with the League's archives and past that he was called the school's historian. Campbell also painted himself, but rarely exhibited his work.⁶⁵ Like Hess, he functions in this narrative as an example of a critical voice whose tastes traversed the spectrum between abstraction and representation, and indeed, many of articles in *Art News* were indeed published under Hess's editorship.) But where Hess focused on broader questions of historical necessity and generational differences, Campbell's writing revolved around issues like the artist's unique perceptual process and aesthetic response.

Of the Knoedler exhibition, Campbell wrote:

Nell Blaine, Louisa Matthiasdottir, Leland Bell, Robert De Niro and Hyde Solomon are all members of what has come to be known as the second generation of the New York School. ... They began to react against Abstract-Expressionism just when some of the biggest names in the movement were about to get world-wide attention. ... It was not that they rejected everything that Abstract-Expressionism stood for. ... But they did come to the conclusion that the road to the future did not historically or inevitably lead through Abstract-Expressionism. Each of them was searching for his own solution to a personal problem. It seemed more and more that a solution lay in a return to the various traditions of modern art. From this the realization followed that, to go forward, it was not necessary to start with what was said on all sides to be the most advanced point in modern art. This meant making an heroic decision – to reject originality.⁶⁶

In other words, Campbell considered that De Niro, Matthiasdottir, and Solomon reacted against Abstract Expressionism just as it was coming to the fore, and looked to personal solutions and to art history rather than assuming the newest or most original path. Campbell linked the artists in terms of their shared goal of finding a personal way

⁶⁵ Campbell's work was shown at the Contemporary Arts Gallery, Tanager Gallery, Kornblee Gallery, and the Green Mountain Gallery.

⁶⁶ Lawrence Campbell, "Five Americans face reality," *Art News* 62 (September 1963): 25.

of expressing the sensory experience, and their simultaneous realization that it is inherently inexpressible. They were not copying nature but achieving an individual mode of communication.

In his review, Campbell depicted Blaine's work as a mixture of explosive and controlled color experience, and noted her simultaneous "romantic nostalgia." He characterized Matthiasdottir as "ruthlessly dissecting" appearances and forms. Bell, he stated, went even further than his wife – like a "connoisseur," he "searches for style and squeezes it out like drops from a lemon." His figures become mysterious symbols. In De Niro, Campbell noted the "electrifying, jumping rhythm" and the "aura of smudge which starts as an elimination of a form and survives as a living part of the work." Campbell, in other words, searched in his review for the essence of each artist. He isolated what he found unique in their perceptual and artistic endeavor. Perhaps most importantly, Campbell attempted to analyze each artist on his or her own terms.

Through the 1960s, Campbell would review exhibitions of Beck, Bell, Blaine, De Niro, Georges, Matthiasdottir, and Resika. During this period he also wrote profiles of Blaine and Georges for *Art News* ("Blaine Paints a Picture" and "Georges Paints a Nude").⁶⁷ Campbell wrote with a sensitivity to the artist and an interest in technique and process that reflects his own experience as an artist. He remarked on the shifts these painters made from abstraction to representation without judgment or fanfare. On the other hand, the process of working from life or source material and its translation into formal terms endlessly fascinated Campbell. In his profile "Blaine Paints a Picture," Campbell spent paragraphs detailing the set-up of Blaine's palette, before describing her

⁶⁷ Lawrence Campbell, "Blaine Paints a Picture," *Art News* 58 (May 1959): 38-41, 61-62; Lawrence Campbell, "Paul Georges Paints a Nude," *Art News* 64 (January 1966): 52-55, 59-60.

brisk process of mark-making, as she painted a still-life set before a window in Gloucester, Massachusetts (*Harbor and Green Cloth*, 1958, fig. 3.15).

When she finally started, there was nothing but some nervous marks - a rapid, jerky writing with paint... But from the start... there seemed to be...a logic, steadily unfolding, of color-threads spreading in all directions... Terra Rosa, Indian Red, then Cerulean mixed with white, small wriggling strokes, then some dots. It was impossible to tell what she was representing.⁶⁸

Campbell continued, noting the divergences Blaine made from nature, like window sashes that appear dark in real life but which Blaine paints light. He determines, “She does not depend on what lies before her, though she paints what she ‘sees.’”⁶⁹

In conversation with Campbell, Blaine stated that she relied more on a feeling about nature and the painting than on accuracy. By this point in her career she had also developed a more intuitive stance on form and arrangement. She is quoted in the article:

When painting from nature, or from anything, it is easy to mix colors and match up each part of the subject with the corresponding part in the painting, but I avoid this. Also I don’t want to think about form, arrangement, etc., as I once thought of them when I was an abstract painter. I don’t even want to analyze while I’m working. I want to seem uncontrived all the way down the line.⁷⁰

By the following year, when Campbell reviewed an exhibition of her work at Poindexter, he declared that Blaine “is one of the best painters in America of the under-forty generation.”⁷¹ (It was in this same year that Blaine contracted polio while traveling in Greece; the paintings under review preceded her illness.) Campbell again attempted to describe Blaine’s relationship to the perceptual process, writing:

She arranges her paintings by moving the objects around before she starts painting. She selects her landscapes and out-of-doors subjects with equal

⁶⁸ Lawrence Campbell, “Blaine Paints a Picture,” *Art News* 58 (May 1959): 40.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁷¹ Lawrence Campbell, “Nell Blaine,” *Art News* 59 (April 1960):13.

care. While she paints she projects her feelings on the appearance of what is before her, but without Expressionist distortions. It is more a feeling about color, and the direction of color shapes.⁷²

Similarly, in reviewing an exhibition of Bell's painting at the Zabriskie Gallery, Campbell discussed the artist's source material – interestingly, a Scandinavian magazine with photographs of nudist camps, and Bell's "struggle": how to paint this "unposed" figure in a non-schematic manner.⁷³ In writing on De Niro, Campbell matter-of-factly wrote of his process of painting from life. Campbell considered that for De Niro, the model was an "anchor":

It ties him down so that he can be free to pull with the tide of his imagination. Some painters must smoke while they work, or drink cups of coffee or have a certain smell in their noses. De Niro requires a setup to look at. From one set up he can paint a hundred paintings, each one different from the last. He never copies nor represents. But if one compared the still-life setup with the painting one could identify in the latter the sensation which started in the crumpled green tissue paper, the prim Victorian-Classical bust of plaster, the sea shell, the dusty, faded paper flowers.⁷⁴

Campbell's attention to the artist's process and awareness of what goes into the making of a painting was unique among critics. He did not focus purely on the result and he accepted "life" as a starting-point, but the individual artist's vision as primary.

Campbell's reviews of Beck tracked her progress, from the late 1950s through the 1960s, of transitioning from abstraction to representation – a progression Campbell clearly found compelling. In 1959, he wrote:

Rosemarie Beck was, until recently, an Abstract-Impressionist whose paintings were abstractions of nothing, yet agreeable to look at; but now they are about things – still-lives, figures, interiors, which she discovers in a tapestry of small, breathless brush-touches. These light-specked façades are exhilarating. Her next step could be a rediscovery of Cubism... a

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Lawrence Campbell, "Leland Bell," *Art News* 59 (February 1961): 11-12.

⁷⁴ Lawrence Campbell, "Robert De Niro," *Art News* 59 (October 1960): 12.

Gromaire-Cubism and not a Picasso one. She is finding out things by herself...⁷⁵

Campbell also profiled Georges in this period, in the article *Paul Georges Paints a Nude*, chronicling the process of his painting, *The Studio* (fig. 3.16). The painting depicts a nude shown standing atop a platform, while the artist works and confronts the viewer. The large, mostly empty space of the studio seems to envelop the figures, with a ceiling high above and skylight opening up into yet more empty space. Campbell's article focused both on Georges's technical process and his relationship to the subject. He compared Georges's subject matter to that of Pop Art, saying Georges was compelled to paint what was part of his own world, rather than societal culture. Campbell wrote,

He does not feel a relationship with life outside this world... He is unable to understand the mentality of an artist who can get a thrill out of something completely outside himself, just as he cannot grasp Pop or Op emotionally. An artist who visits a supermarket and says "I'm in relationship with that, and that's my world" seems a foreigner to him because he is looking at it from the outside, and therefore must be some kind of objective Realist...

Campbell continued by discussing Georges's relationship to "realism": "In describing Georges's work perhaps one should say it is 'like Life' rather than Realistic, but it is only so because the force of its conviction makes one accept it."⁷⁶ Campbell detailed the divergences Georges made from life, in order to produce a compelling painting. He discussed Georges's struggles to make the figure classical and timeless, but still natural. He also mentioned Georges's penchant for combining different viewpoints and perspectives within the same painting. (This issue in Georges's work was discussed in Chapter 1, in relation to Hans Hofmann). For instance, in *The Studio*, Georges apparently

⁷⁵ Lawrence Campbell, "Rosemarie Beck," *Art News* 58 (March 1959): 14.

⁷⁶ Lawrence Campbell, "Paul Georges Paints a Nude," *Art News* 64 (January 1966): 55.

painted the skylight from both the top and bottom of a stepladder, then united the two viewpoints.

Campbell's interest in the perceptual process, the original source material, and the filtrations of these subjects through the artist's mind and process, allowed him to see abstraction and representation as a fluid conversation rather than a dichotomy. The artists' individuality became the subject of his writing. However, the personal nature of the perceptual process stands in direct counterpoint to the intentions of Pop Art.

Other Reviews of *Five American Painters* at Knoedler

In another review of the Knoedler exhibition, *Five American Painters*, Irving Sandler attempted to place the artists in relation to their contemporaries.⁷⁷ He compared them, favorably, to Pop artists, beginning his review by writing, "All of the hoopla last season about Pop-Art as the new realism succeeded, unfortunately, in diverting public attention from a number of far more serious figurative shows." He contrasted the objectives of Pop with painters such as those exhibiting at Knoedler:

The Pop-Artists recreate ordinary, mass-produced articles and commercial illustrations – dead pan, with little if any transformation. Unlike them, the painters listed above share the old-fashioned belief that it is a way of looking at external reality and the feeling and the artistry with which an artist expresses his private vision, that counts.⁷⁸

In this statement, Sandler echoed some of Campbell's ideas – the artist as searching to express personal sensory experience, the artist as an individual, as opposed to the artwork as a universal reflection of society. This was, as well, what Leslie Katz was referring to when he wrote about the problems of a "the moment of truth," and of ideological, societal

⁷⁷ Irving Sandler, "In the Art Galleries," *New York Post*, 22 September 1963.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

control of form and content. Katz called for the “integrity of the artist as an individual.”⁷⁹ In 1963, the differences between Pop Art and these figurative painters were already quite clear: Pop Art reflected mass culture, and erased the personality of the artist, while these painters were committed to subjective expression. Subjective expression, was, after all, one of the primary lessons of Hofmann’s teaching, and Sandler noted that three of the artists in the Knoedler show (Blaine, de Niro and Matthiasdottir) had studied with him.

Sandler also referenced the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *New Images of Man*, discussed above, when he wrote, “They refuse to make monsters out of the human figure in the manner of the New-Imagists-of-Man who contrive illustrations of man’s depravity.”⁸⁰ Thus Sandler differentiated the group from this institutional presentation of figurative painting, implying that there were less extreme, less literary, and more complex strategies for figuration.

While Campbell had looked for the individual artistic personality in each artist, Sandler tried to place them in an art-historical lineage. He noted that these artists were “sophisticated and history-minded,” and “engaged in a dialogue with past and present art,” and moved on to analyze the five individually. Bell was linked to (his heroes) Derain and Giacometti, in how he combined solid forms and ravaged space. Sandler considered Matthiasdottir similar but more Expressionist, while Blaine was an intimist who took off from Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Solomon fragmented landscapes à la late Cézanne, and de Niro’s work came from Matisse but with a darker outlook.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Leslie Katz, introduction to *Five American Painters*.

⁸⁰ Irving Sandler, “In the Art Galleries.”

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

In a *New York Times* review, Stuart Preston dealt with the issue of novelty and the artists' relationship to Abstract Expressionism.⁸² He criticized the "public rage for novelty," which he believed led to a "restless" continual change of styles in twentieth-century American art, and "involved a good deal of waste of talent that became unfashionable before it reached full fruition."⁸³ In contrast, he maintained,

Five contemporary American painters exhibiting together at Knoedler's prove that the step from abstract expressionism to modified degrees of realism is not so considerable a one as all that, and certainly not one necessitating a struggle. Their techniques variously bear traces of "action" style. Yet one and all concern themselves with the expression of communicable experiences.⁸⁴

Also in the *New York Times*, John Gruen praised the exhibition as "unquestionably one of the most exciting shows in town."⁸⁵ He was also less restrained than the other authors when he wrote, "Taken as a group these artists represent the 'loner' element in the contemporary stream of changing style."⁸⁶ He described their emerging careers in a manner similar to the other critics:

In the past decade each of them has maintained a high standard of artistic concentration, applying himself solely to the refinement of his particular vocabulary (a predominantly figurative one), and moving ever inward in search of greater clarity and unity of expression.⁸⁷

Together these reviews are compelling because of their willingness to critique the mainstream (Pop Art, museum exhibitions, and the very nature of ever-shifting art world trends), in favor of a group of painters they recognize as "loners" – but committed, serious, sophisticated, and individual artists. It is difficult to imagine now such out-of

⁸² Stuart Preston, "A Tour of Variety Fair: Whitney Retrospective; A Realist Quintet; Turner Watercolors," *New York Times*, 22 September 1963.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ John Gruen, "5 'Loners' With High Standards," *New York Times*, 22 September 1963.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

hand dismissals of Pop Art, in favor of values like sustained commitment, genuineness, and independence from fashion. However, their position was also a critical strategy: when the Pop Art movement was still young it was possible to “stall” by dismissing it as frivolous. In general, this was not a sustainable position for a critic, and would not help to position the figurative painters on a long term, art historical basis.

Martica Sawin was among the critics to contrast the Knoedler exhibition to Pop Art. In *Arts Magazine*, she began her review by applauding Knoedler’s implied rejection of the movement.⁸⁸ She recounted that a painter acquaintance had lamented “so many of the galleries couldn’t make up their minds whether or not to go ‘pop,’” noting,

Fortunately for those of us who may be similarly cynical or simply bored by this whole ludicrous situation, Knoedler’s, while wishing to make a gesture toward the new in American art, has managed to keep its head. In fact, not only has this venerable gallery refrained from “going pop,” it has, thanks to Leslie Katz ... presented strong evidence that painting continues to flourish as an exciting and vital medium despite the growing onslaught of objects and attendant verbiage claiming exclusive historical or evolutionary validity.⁸⁹

Sawin began writing art criticism in the 1950s. In 1967 she was appointed chair of the art history department at Parsons School of Design, where she was a member of the faculty until 1995. She would later author *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, as well as monographs on Wolf Kahn and Nell Blaine.⁹⁰ Her first husband, David Sawin, was an under-known painter who studied with Meyer Schapiro and was admired by Arthur Danto.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Martica Sawin, “Good Painting—No Label,” *Arts Magazine* 37 (September 1963), 36-41.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹⁰ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995); Martica Sawin, *Wolf Kahn, Landscape Painter* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1981); Martica Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998).

⁹¹ Arthur Coleman Danto, *Encounters & Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 15-24.

In this piece, Sawin concerned herself with how these artists were grouped – where their commonalities lay, and the problems associated with the failure to label or name them as a “school.” Sawin believed they were “selected with a regard for quality rather than for a common stylistic denominator.” Like Katz and most of the critics, she focused on “perhaps their strongest bond [which] is the highly personal and individualistic approach which each has toward painting.”⁹² She vouched for their continued relevance, placing their work in the context of a response to the New York School, and outlining the innovations that both stem from and displace the theoretical underpinnings of this movement:

To counter all the claims made that painting must be flat, must be an event, must be concrete, here is the visual evidence that the tension between the flat surface and the pull of illusionary space gives sustained visual interest, that manifest painting activity can be more than an end in itself, and that paint playing an identifying role, among others, is at least as interesting as paint used for its materiality alone.⁹³

Sawin also noted that these painters were able to assimilate elements of the new (i.e. the New York School) with the traditional, and considered this process relevant: “If elements of the new are synthesized with some of the inherited elements, the selective process itself should be considered significant and historically valid and not put down as weakness or vacillation.” Sawin elaborated:

All of them... have a high esteem for art, for the great Western tradition.... Yet they fully understand the import of modern movements, use some of the elements of action painting, need Cubism, need Mondrian, share the discomfiture of pop artists, but rely on themselves for the main endeavor.⁹⁴

⁹² Martica Sawin, “Good Painting–No Label.”

⁹³ Ibid., 37.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 37-39.

Sawin wrote about the artists individually from the perspective of someone who knew them personally, and had a comfort level with their process. She noted that Bell was “so absorbed by his goal of ultimate perfection that he is rarely satisfied with a work...” She was aware that Blaine “sees the masses of still life and landscape as light-reflecting surfaces rather than as solids to be analyzed.” She informed us that “Matthiasdottir feels, if her work is to have unity a painting must be completed at a single sitting, must be right the first time or not at all.” She focused on the artists’ intent and process and concluded that the five artists in the exhibition were all rather diverse:

These artists appear to differ on many points – on their concept of space, on the degree of tangibility of the visual world, on which elements are the most crucial to grasp and which means should be used. This in itself, this absence of the doctrinaire, seems to be the most common point of agreement, and it is this which makes the show a significant one that will reward the shock-weary observer.⁹⁵

Sawin concluded by positing that this work—unlike contemporary, more trendy art—was not superficial production bolstered only by theory, but was “good painting [that] can topple these verbal edifices... [and] should please those who like to look for themselves.”⁹⁶

Sawin’s point—that the lack of a label, name or school for this group is problematic—is apt. Without a movement name, the art world had become too massive for the figurative painters to make a serious impact. Pop Art could only be brushed aside as “frivolous” for a short time, and only by a few critics. Its impact was massive, both intellectually and economically. Rather than breaking open the field from its concentration on abstraction, Pop emphasized the “idea” over painting, and further continued the move away from figuration.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 41.

Without a label, the painters were destined to remain grouped simply as “figurative,” “representational” or even “realist,” without regard to the deeper meanings and intentions that informed their work and process.⁹⁷ These designations also effectively erased their background and training as abstractionists or dedicated formalists, for whom the landscape, still life, or figure was often just an armature, not the *raison-d’être*. An exhibition held at the end of 1963 at Schoelkopf Gallery, which included Matthiasdottir and Bell, along with Georges, Lennart Anderson, Harold Bruder, Audrey Flack, Gabriel Laderman, Philip Pearlstein, and Sidney Tillim, was in fact titled *9 Realist Painters*. The problems of this designation were articulated in a review by Hilton Kramer that appeared in *Arts Magazine* in January 1964.⁹⁸

The Criticism of Hilton Kramer

Hilton Kramer began a review of *9 Realist Painters* with a direct critique of the exhibition’s title:

When one has seen this exhibition, its title is at first baffling and then irritating. Nine painters there are, but are they “Realists”? And if they are, does it enhance one’s interest in them as painters to know this? Is it possible to have any interest in them as painters, or are they at best a curious cultural fact? If the majority – as I believe – are not Realists, what is it, then, they have in common? What, at this stage in our aesthetic culture is Realism anyway?⁹⁹

Kramer attempted to define Realism, suggesting how problematic it was for contemporary painters to actually revert to that “desire to render, visually intact,

⁹⁷ A dissertation by Ruth Bass was centered on the designation of Bell, Blaine, Georges, Matthiasdottir, and Resika as Realists. See Ruth Bass, “Five Realist Painters and the Concept of Contemporary American Realist Painting: An Aesthetic Study of Works by Leland Bell, Nell Blaine, Paul Georges, Louisa Matthiasdottir, and Paul Resika” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1978).

⁹⁸ Hilton Kramer, “‘Realists’ and Others,” *Arts Magazine* 38 (January 1964): 18-23.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

something immediate and recognizable from observed personal experience as painting's principal expressive *raison d'être*.”¹⁰⁰ Most importantly, Kramer perceived the Realist impulse involving a rejection of Cubism – he described it as the painter “obliged to jump the Cubist hurdle.” Kramer recounted the backward journey that artists must take, hoping to find firm enough ground to carry them past Cubism, and how rarely this was possible for a contemporary artist.¹⁰¹

Kramer found only three painters in the exhibition “in whom one can take an unequivocal interest”: Bell, Matthiasdottir, and Pearlstein. Thus, early in his career, Kramer established his “favorites” – he continued to champion a very select group of representational painters for many years, of which these three were central.

Kramer believed that of the three, only Pearlstein showed signs of developing into a Realist. He instead placed Bell and Matthiasdottir within a general French tradition, not a specifically Realist one. In fact, he considered Realism irrelevant to Matthiasdottir; instead calling attention to the “painter’s sensibility” – a “metaphysical calm.” In Bell he drew attention to the sense of pressure to “get something settled” and simultaneously, the sense of an uncompleted task. Kramer opposed the painters at Schoelkopf to those at a concurrent Whitney Annual, stating “the only thing that unites the ‘Realists’ is their recoil from the riot of styles, devices and novelties,” a sentiment that echoes the response to the Knoedler show, in insistently positioning them as serious rather than frivolous.

Larry Campbell also had trouble with the grouping of the artists, complaining in an *Art News* review that Laderman, Pearlstein, Tillim, and Anderson formed a distinct

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 18-19

group that overshadowed Bell, Matthiasdottir, Georges, Bruder, and Flack.¹⁰² Although Campbell did not specify stylistic differences, perhaps he found the tighter, more linear style of the former too unlike the painterly approach of the latter artists. The show codified, however, some aesthetic interests that the Schoelkopf Gallery would represent in the coming years. Robert Schoelkopf, who will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 5: “Career Arcs,” opened his gallery at 825 Madison Avenue in 1962. By 1964, he had begun mounting solo shows of Bell, Matthiasdottir, Laderman, and Tillim. Schoelkopf became known for presenting contemporary representational painters; William Bailey became one of his most successful artists. He also represented lesser-known masters, like the estates of Joseph Stella and Gaston Lachaise, and he was one of the few New York dealers to exhibit photography along with painting and sculpture.

Kramer, who called Schoelkopf “a very important figure in the development of New York figurative painting at that time,” was hired by the *New York Times* as a staff art critic in 1965 (one year after the review of *9 Realists*), and became chief art critic eight years later.¹⁰³ During his time there, he was able to devote significant critical attention to figurative painters, and in fact recalls his reasons for hiring John Russell:

[Russell] had more sympathy for a lot of things that I frankly did not like. I mean, the whole neo-Dada thing, Rauschenberg and Johns and all Pop Art - none of that ever interested me at all... But John [Russell] 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.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Lawrence Campbell, “Nine realists,” *Art News* 62 (February 1964):10.

¹⁰³ Hilton Kramer, interview by author, December 10, 2002.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Kramer's pieces in the *Times* consistently conveyed a sense of where the artist was in the trajectory of his or her career, an understanding of their ambitions, and how they had achieved or fallen short of their goals. Bell and Matthiasdottir were important artists for Kramer for a long time. From 1957 to 1960, he lived in the Chelsea Hotel, and Bell and Matthiasdottir lived nearby, on West 16th Street. Kramer recalls "spending a lot of time with them, listening to a lot of Lee's lectures, particularly on Derain and Héliou."¹⁰⁵ He recalls:

I was very keen about [Matthiasdottir'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. [Bell'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.¹⁰⁶

In addition to Bell and Matthiasdottir, he wrote about and especially admired Beck. He wrote, for example, of Beck, in 1966, "For several years now, Miss Beck has been carefully making her approach to the figure composition on the grand scale. Now she has at last taken the plunge."¹⁰⁷ Of the other artists discussed in this dissertation, he wrote about De Niro, Georges, and Resika, though these were less his favorites. More recently, in a 2001 review of Georges and a 2002 review of Resika, Kramer expressed increased enthusiasm for these two artists.¹⁰⁸ However, Kramer usually did not fail to remark on the "unfashionable" or "out-of-sync" qualities of these painters. For example, in the same review of Beck cited above, he discussed "the example of a dedicated talent

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Hilton Kramer, "Rosemarie Beck," *New York Times*, 22 October 1966, 22.

¹⁰⁸ Hilton Kramer, "The Loaded Brush: New Resika Work is Without Peer," *The New York Observer*, 1 December 2002; Hilton Kramer, "A Paul Georges Exhibition Recalls Figurative 50s," *The New York Observer*, 28 May 2000.

pursuing a difficult and unfashionable course.”¹⁰⁹ And he began a glowing review of Matthiasdottir in 1968 by writing, “There are painters who neither seek, nor attain, the limelight – who indeed work in styles that are proof against the limelight – whose pictures exist in a realm beyond the sensations and disappointments of current ideas.”¹¹⁰ The consistent inclusion of these types of statements shows how, by this time, their place as outsiders in the art world was entrenched. It was no longer possible to write about their work without mentioning such issues. Furthermore, these statements—juxtaposing trendiness versus sincerity—became a tactical move for critics, allowing them to stall or avoid confronting Pop Art, its impact and its intellectual basis.

Although Kramer was clearly dedicated to reminding the public about the enduring nature of representation in the face of Pop and Minimalism, he was still quite critical of some of the artists treated in this dissertation. He had a fairly unqualified admiration for Matthiasdottir, but Bell disappointed him slightly; De Niro he found too hasty and unfinished; Resika was compelling but not yet resolved; and Georges was too simplistic and politically-minded.

By the mid-1960s, many of these artists were beginning to paint their mature work, which Kramer reviewed. Matthiasdottir was painting her large still lifes and Icelandic landscapes. Kramer spoke of the “wonderful gusto in her work... a very affecting animation and control in the performance. Above all, there is a total investment of feeling in every form that comes from the brush.” Of the Icelandic landscapes, Kramer wrote, “No one has attempted this vein of feeling with quite this authority since

¹⁰⁹ Hilton Kramer, “Rosemarie Beck.”

¹¹⁰ Hilton Kramer, “Louisa Matthiasdottir,” *New York Times*, 20 January 1968, 25.

Edvard Munch.”¹¹¹ This depth of feeling was something Kramer found lacking in Bell’s work, although he had a deep regard for Bell’s conversation with the old masters.

In a lengthy profile and review of Bell’s work in 1968, Kramer discussed the artist’s allegiances to Derain and Balthus, and the rejection of modernism and sheer ambition these enthusiasms required. However, Kramer found “in certain of his pictures – particularly in the copious series of family groups (three figures chasing a butterfly) ... the sense of an artist conducting a closed dialogue with the past rather than a dialogue with life.” Kramer continued, “There are fine passages in many of the pictures in this series. Only a very gifted and very serious painter could have produced them. But they are closed – closed to life – in a way his self portraits are not.”¹¹² Kramer compared Bell to Balthus, believing it was the subjective, raw feeling in Balthus’s painting that lifted it out of academicism. Kramer found this quality in Bell’s self portraits, but not his figure groups (see fig. 3.17), in which he considered Bell more entrenched in a conversation with art history. Kramer was likely responding here to Bell’s prioritizing of form over feeling or meaning. When Bell spoke about his art, he denied that content had any significance, and to a certain extent, this position manifested itself in his work.

De Niro’s work, although impressive to Kramer, seemed to irritate him - he found De Niro impatient and slack. He disliked what was part of the artist’s signature style – the lack of “finished effects” and the “general sketchiness.”¹¹³ Interestingly, these were some of the very qualities applauded by critics in the 1950s, discussed earlier in this chapter. Kramer also referred to De Niro’s interest in Matisse in a way that suggested the younger artist was derivative and not pushing Matisse’s possibilities into new

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Hilton Kramer, “Painting in the Shadow of the Museum,” *New York Times*, 28 April 1968, sec. D, p. 33.

¹¹³ Hilton Kramer, “Robert De Niro,” *New York Times*, 21 January 1967, 23.

dimensions. He reviewed an exhibition of De Niro's sculptural work with the following statement:

Whereas in Matisse's sculpture there is a realization of form directly related to the artist's pictorial problems, in De Niro's sculpture the realization – such as it is – seems to be addressed to Matisse's problems. There is a sense of *déjà vu* here, of an aspiration that has not been transformed into Mr. De Niro's vision.¹¹⁴

Kramer did not address Georges's work much through the 1960s, but in 1976 published an extensive but intensely critical review of his political paintings: his *My Kent State* series (see fig. 3.18), *The Assassins of the Sixties*, and paintings about the Vietnam War. Kramer placed the paintings in the context of a "Courbetesque ambition" – Realist political allegories like Courbet's *The Painter's Studio; A Real Allegory* (1855). Kramer found similarity in how Georges, like Courbet, cast himself as a character in the political drama. Georges opposed art and war and illustrates public problems as a private artistic crisis – using the female nude to symbolize artistic inspiration. Kramer considered Georges's metaphors simplistic; he writes, "[Georges's] political sentiments are the standard liberal sentiments of the 1960s. War is bad, and love and/or art – represented in these pictures, by a female nude – is good: That is about the size of Georges's political mind."¹¹⁵ Georges contended that the female nude represented the "muse" – an ideal of completely free expression and creation. In this construct *My Kent State* was more about the attack on free speech and expression, showing the artist trying to cling to his own creativity in the face of what he perceived as a controlling and aggressive administration.¹¹⁶ However, in a painting ostensibly about 1960s activism and liberal

¹¹⁴ Hilton Kramer, "Robert De Niro," *New York Times*, 11 May 1968, 30.

¹¹⁵ Hilton Kramer, "A Disappointing Attempt at Political Allegory," *New York Times*, 11 July 1976, 77.

¹¹⁶ See Stanley Grand, *Paul Georges: Self Portraits*. Exh. cat. (Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania: Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes University, 1995). Georges's 1972-76 painting, *The Mugging of the Muse*, dealt with a

politics, the female as “muse” or as a victim of aggression is also startling. It was painted a century after Courbet’s canvas was made, and in an age of feminist awareness.

In responding to Paul Resika’s work in the 1960s, Kramer displayed a mixture of admiration and respect but distinct criticism, similar to his attitude toward Bell and De Niro. In these years, Resika had begun working outdoors, making landscape paintings, first in France and then in Cape Cod – the area that still inspires the majority of Resika’s production. His 1960s paintings stem from the influence of Corot, and utilize a palette of dark greens and umbers (see fig. 3.19). Of a 1968 exhibition at Peridot, Kramer wrote,

There is a great deal of old-fashioned painterly craft and intelligence in them. Clearly, Mr. Resika knows what he wants to accomplish in his painting – in general, it is what painters as different as Corot and Derain aspired to, and often attained – even if he is not always as able to bring it off. There is something very impressive in the ambition animating this work, but the results invite a standard of comparison that the work is not always equal to. Still in a picture such as *The Farm near Gordes, III* (1967-68), Mr. Resika displays a real authority... This is painting removed from current esthetic ideas, but totally serious in its own way.¹¹⁷

Resika had joined the Peridot Gallery in about 1964. It was run by Lou Pollack, the brother of a painter named Reginald Pollack. He had shown abstract painters like James Brooks and Philip Guston, then moved uptown and developed a more mixed stable of artists. Resika recalled:

[Pollack was] a true gentleman of the old school – honorable... Everyone would come in there, so it gave you a certain respect. Hilton Kramer was always in there, and Alfred Barr, and Dorothy Miller... He was a dealer who was formed from French tastes. No other gallery could see this

similar crisis on a more personal level. This painting will be discussed in Chapter 5. It depicted likenesses of Tony Siani, Jack Silberman, and John Bradford, who were all members of the Alliance of Figurative Painters along with Paul Georges, mugging “the muse” in a New York City alley. Georges was reacting to Siani’s tendency to ask about and insist on artists developing specific meaning in their painting. Georges felt such constraints were an attack on free inspiration. He represented this attack as the mugging of the muse.

¹¹⁷ Hilton Kramer, “Paul Resika,” *New York Times*, 30 March 1968, 28.

quality, but he could see the quality.... He died young, and Joan Washburn took it over.¹¹⁸

Resika remembered that Hess was also close to Pollack, so he “had his ear” when showing at Peridot. It was during this period that a feature article on Resika, written by Claire Nicholas White, was published in *Art News*.¹¹⁹ Resika felt that this article, and the reviews by Kramer “sort of took me out of obscurity... We were still not with the trend... but we got some water, so we could stay alive.”¹²⁰

Landscape painting itself also literally brought Resika’s painting out of its dark, more melancholic phase. When he met his current wife, Blair Philips, and began to paint in Cape Cod, the work changed and he approached an enduring subject and style. Together they spent summers at Blair’s family cabins in the woods of Wellfleet, on a private pond. Blair and her daughters modeled. Resika also worked outdoors in Vaucluse, France in this period, as well as in Mexico, where Blair’s mother lived. Although he worked *en plein air*, he also completed larger landscapes in the studio. Resika continues to work both outdoors and in the studio today, although now the studio work comprises the vast majority of his production. Resika finds a motif in nature, works on a series of sketches until he basically internalizes it, then makes his large oil paintings exclusively in the studio. In a review from 1965, Kramer had expressed his preference for the small sketches done outdoors, “His small oil sketches have something of Constable’s freshness and lyric élan, being at once faithful to the scene observed and to

¹¹⁸ Paul Resika, interview by Avis Berman, 31 May 2004, transcript, The National Academy of Design Oral History Project, New York, 2-15, 2-16.

¹¹⁹ Claire Nicholas White, “Resika’s Delectable Mountains.” *Art News* 66 (April 1967): 48-49.

¹²⁰ Resika, interview by Berman, 2-19.

the painter's spontaneous response. But such a response is notoriously difficult to sustain in larger and more elaborate compositions...»¹²¹

Kramer's criticism was indispensable for bringing these artists to the public eye, but he maintained a reserved enthusiasm that did not ultimately serve to champion their accomplishment or promote them as a specifically unified group or generation. His consistent emphasis on their outsider status was likely also ultimately undermining. In more recent years, writing for the *New York Observer*, Kramer widened his scope slightly in terms of the artists he championed, becoming a more consistent voice for figurative artists swept aside. However, within this context he also became a more belligerent voice against contemporary art and has been widely labeled as a conservative. With Kramer as their best-known apologist, the figurative painters could be even more easily dismissed as conservative as well.

Kramer frequently positioned the artists in terms of art historical predecessors – comparing their ambitions, style, and, most importantly, the “quality” of their work to these models. Matthiasdottir was likened to Munch, Bell compared to Balthus, De Niro to Matisse, Georges to Courbet, and Resika to Corot and Derain. He asked, essentially, how they held up to proven masters. Thus he placed them in a larger context of art history as opposed to addressing how their work emerged out of their own time. A conversation with art history is, indeed, essential to these artists' practice, and these are valid questions. However, by positioning them out of their own time, they became further marginalized in the mainstream art world, where powerful institutions constantly sought to define what was unique and essential in the given period.

¹²¹ Hilton Kramer, “Paul Resika,” *New York Times*, 4 December 1965, 27.

Conclusion

Thomas Hess, in 1957, had attempted to define a new period in the New York art world by identifying the goals and directions of a younger generation. He outlined several different artistic strategies, among them a gestural figuration employed by Blaine, Bell and De Niro. The Museum of Modern Art twice sought to codify a “new” figuration, mainly by limiting the scope of the endeavor to a post-war existential brutalism, and positing a literary image-making process as distinct from abstraction. By 1963, the work of Rauschenberg, Johns, and Pop Art made it possible for critics and institutions to define and defend strategies for representation that were connected to the socio-political realities of their particular moment. The work of painters like Blaine, De Niro, Georges, and Resika stemmed from completely different concerns. Hess’s complex readings of a younger generation became superfluous in an art world that was, due to Hegelian thought, reduced to a sequential narrative of “progress” towards abstraction. In this reading, figuration seemed distinctly retrograde. Still, it was remarkable that a show like *Five American Painters* at Knoedler captured the attention of a press not completely ready to embrace the novelties of Pop. Several writers responded by heralding what they perceived as the more humble, genuine and time-tested approaches of the artists exhibited at Knoedler. Thus, however, began the also problematic equation of positing “serious art” against the “frivolous” or “sensational.”

Lawrence Campbell responded by considering each artist’s personal intentions and process, and attributing validity to the rejection of originality for its own sake. While responses to the show were positive, they made clear, on the other hand, that these painters were distinct from the mainstream and the status quo, with one reporter going so

far as to call them “loners.”¹²² They had become a distinct, separate group, but still lacked a name, as Sawin rightly noted. Without a name, their impact on a vast art world was minimal. They had emerged from the abstract vanguard, but it would be increasingly difficult to place them in a relevant contemporary context. Hilton Kramer, instead, dealt with their work as the product of a much longer conversation with the past. The ways in which these artists were perceived by the museums and the press, along with the trends of the art world and the shifting direction of their work, all contributed to the artists’ gradually being removed from the center of a flourishing New York art world. In the next chapter, “The Artists’ Voice,” we will see, in comparison, how artist-writers positioned and theorized this work, and examine the writing and theory of the artists themselves, which motivated and informed their painting.

¹²² John Gruen, “5 ‘Loners’ With High Standards.”

CHAPTER FOUR: THE ARTIST'S VOICE

In the previous chapter, I examined the painters as they were theorized and perceived by art critics and institutions and in the context of representational painting at large. It traced a path from their critical reception as insiders in the art world to an increasing marginalization, especially as Pop Art came to the fore. Now, in Chapter 4, I will address the artists themselves as theorists of their own work, as well as the writing of other painters (“artist-critics”). Artists through history have been adept theorists, and several of these painters are no exception. Some chose to speak little or not at all about their work: Louisa Matthiasdottir is a key example. Paul Resika disliked the idea of speaking or writing about art, although he delivered a few lectures, participated in panel discussions, and was interviewed about his work. Others, like Leland Bell, were passionate, articulate and influential lecturers. Bell transmitted a contagious enthusiasm for an unusual canon of art historical heroes, especially the late work of Derain. Robert De Niro enjoyed writing – poetry as well as articles on art, which are evocative, abstract mediations on artistic sensibility. Rosemarie Beck was an intellectual, and her ideas about culture, literature and art, available through lecture manuscripts, informed her work. Mercedes Matter found a theoretical voice in her teaching: she founded the New York Studio School after publishing a passionate article about the problems in art education, and she published texts and delivered lectures on Hofmann, Giacometti and her father, Arthur B. Carles. Through her founding and the continuation of the New York Studio School, Matter was the most influential theorist of the subjects treated in this

chapter. The painters increasingly codified their theory and ideas as their careers matured in the 1970s.

This chapter also takes us back full circle to the narrative beginning of this story: the teaching and theory of Hans Hofmann, because we see how several painters, rooted in his ideas, formulated their own by the 1970s and developed them as teachers themselves. Matter, especially, exemplifies this, as the New York Studio School was formed completely in the mold of Hofmann's school, and Hofmann very much approved of the Studio School's aims.

This chapter is organized into three sections, each of which pairs and compares the writing and theory of two artists on the same theme. In the first section, I discuss the artistic process, as it is theorized by Matter and Beck. Beck's and Matter's ideas about process are both steeped in existentialist philosophy: they valued the questioning nature of the pursuit. Matter went so far as to value this process almost as an end in itself, and considered the final work – even in the drawing medium – nearly an impossibility; while Beck, who was in fact a very prolific artist, discussed experimentation and using drawing to explore a subject with spontaneity and freshness.

Next, I present the writing of two philosophical artist-critics, Louis Finkelstein and Fairfield Porter, both of whom attempted to define representational or “realist” painting. Finkelstein's contribution to this generation is important: in the catalogue for an exhibition that presented work of many of his peers including Beck, Bell, Blaine, De Niro, Georges, Matthiasdottir, Matter, Resika, as well as his own work and that of Porter, he coined the term “Painterly Representation.” The exhibition, which was held at Ingber Gallery in New York and traveled throughout the country, was curated by Finkelstein and

organized by Patricia Mainardi, who was working as the manager of the gallery, and who also edited the catalogue. Finkelstein arrived at a definition of this painting and showed how form creates meaning, by recognizing the essential formal goals of the individual artists. Porter, who also located meaning within the formal choices of the artist, used this premise to complicate our assumptions of the stylistic categorization of “realist painting” and to present his rejection of “manifesto criticism” – theory that begins with a biased premise and applies it outward to all art.

Lastly, I compare the writing of Bell and De Niro, who were close friends and supporters of one another’s work, despite some aesthetic differences of opinion. They both wrote about art history – 19th and 20th century painters. Bell’s dogmatic, analytic writing on Derain is compared to De Niro’s more oblique discussions of specific elements that interest him in the work of Corot, Bonnard, and Soutine. The differences in their writing become paradigms for their painting itself: Bell valued the concrete, the universal, and the complete, whereas De Niro admired restraint and evocation. I will thus also show, in this chapter, how theory informed the work of these painters and was translated into practice, or vice-versa: how the artists gradually developed theory out of sustained work and reflection on their practice.

The organization of this chapter—pairing of two artists on a theme—serves to contextualize the artists into their period, to show how they increasingly became a loose “group” or “generation” of artists, and to highlight differences among them. For example, when we look at Matter’s ideology and the founding of the New York Studio School, we see both how connected she was to the avant-garde art world, and how entrenched her ideas were with theorists like Harold Rosenberg, but we can also see her

parting ways with the rising trends – art based on ideas and popular culture, rather than rooted in sustained practice. Looking at Porter and Finkelstein in tandem highlights the differences between these two artist-critics. Porter had a successful, influential career as a critic who could parse ideas with succinct phrases and adeptly describe and situate an artist’s work. By establishing himself as an enemy of “manifesto criticism” he was able to write about a wide variety of work with authority. Finkelstein’s writing was less known in the larger art world of the time, although his contribution is significant as he positioned his peers and analyzed their work formally with utmost thoroughness. Through Bell and De Niro we see two artists developing their own unique, “contrarian” canons of art history – Bell’s heroization of the late Derain, and the quirky aesthetic parallels De Niro made between poets, painters, and actors like Corot, Verlaine, and Greta Garbo.

Process: Rosemarie Beck and Mercedes Matter

Texts written by Rosemarie Beck and Mercedes Matter demonstrate their intense commitment to the process of art-making, and to studio practice. Matter, in particular, revered process: this was an essential part of her belief in the “ideal of the artist” (discussed briefly in Chapter 2). I am referring here, to Matter’s respect for the serious artist, devoted to his or her work as an intellectual pursuit. Matter nurtured such people (for her, it was always male artists), praised them and built them up. Matter saw the artistic process as transformative, even transcendental. Process was as important—or even more important—than the finished artwork. As discussed earlier, her role model in this was Giacometti; she describes how he gave her “permission” to spend an indefinite

period of time working and refining, and that this work, in itself, was valuable. Although Giacometti was not one of Beck's artistic heroes, Beck's texts similarly reflect existentialist thought. Beck believed that personal questioning, doubt, and a commitment to the act and process of working was essential. Beck's and Matter's ideas are firmly grounded in their time: existential philosophy was important to the Abstract Expressionists, and it influenced Matter's and Beck's mentors. Philip Guston is one such shared example (Matter and Beck both had close friendships with him and the two women first met at his Woodstock house in the 1950s); his work embodies an existential quest in terms of the gradual search for a personal voice, the commitment to self-doubt as an aspect of practice, and the literal subject matter of the late work which deals with issues of alienation and human suffering.

Matter's ideas about studio practice were, of course, essential to her personal practice - she worked for years on large-scale drawings on canvas and paintings with long since dead and desiccated still-life set-ups. These ideas also informed her evaluation of other artists and her views on art education. Matter's text on Giacometti, published in a monograph with photographs by her husband Herbert Matter, positioned the artist in terms of a sustained, unyielding search for absolute truth.¹ She considered Giacometti's quest heroic in this sense; he made work that had an affective presence as powerful as life, but he also valued the gains made, and regenerative energies achieved in the process itself.

Matter also applied her ideas about process to art education. Her text, "What's Wrong with U.S. Art Schools," published in 1963 in *Art News*, became the catalyst for

¹ *Alberto Giacometti*. Photographed by Herbert Matter, text by Mercedes Matter, foreword by Louis Finkelstein and an introduction by Andrew Forge (New York: Abrams, 1987).

the founding of the New York Studio School.² Matter, who was teaching at the time at Pratt Institute, criticized the state of art education for lacking the continuity of work in a studio. Art education, she maintained, taught students about the state of the art world—“what is going on”—but never to actually draw. Matter noted that the dim, quiet, dusty world of the old academy had been replaced by a frenzied atmosphere in which students dashed between short classes, through which art was deconstructed into separate activities according to the class period and instructor. Matter, who found homework assignments and exercises superficial, and believed in sustained studio practice, called for a corrective: to “restore the conditions for working which make the study of art possible,” and “strip away everything but its basic, serious components: drawing, painting, sculpture, history of art.”³

Beck’s text, *A Series of Letters*, is similar, in its almost internal questioning of what it means to be an artist, how one judges oneself, one’s own work, and that of others, and the insistence on constant practice and a fair amount of struggle.⁴ *A Series of Letters* was delivered as a lecture on several occasions when Beck was asked to speak on her work. Instead of the standard artist lecture, Beck read a series of fictional letters she had written to younger artists, accompanied by a slide presentation of her work. She addressed in each letter a theoretical question or crisis of faith that the (imagined) younger artist was having, responding in her true voice with advice and information.

Both Beck and Matter felt that an artwork should represent the sum-total of nature, experience, the artist’s true voice and formal structure. Thus they viewed the

² Mercedes Matter, “What’s Wrong with U.S. Art Schools?” *Art News* 62 (September 1963): 40-41, 56-58.

³ Matter, “What’s Wrong with U.S. Art Schools?” 58.

⁴ Rosemarie Beck, “A Series of Letters: on her work” (Lecture presented at the New York Studio School, 23 November 1999, videorecording, New York Studio School; and at Dartmouth College and Smith College in the 1990s). Transcript, Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck, New York.

process of art-making as an almost heroic activity. It was not enough to have just one piece of the equation – to simply have passion, belief, or interest. One must engage fully, question, and above all, be aware of the *whole*: how all parts of the painting work together. In one letter, Beck defined her “philosophy”, saying that, above all, painting is about the “heightened sense of relationships among the components.” She continued:

I’m against the fragment. I’m trying for the whole. My real ambition, the little nudge or prick at the back of the mind is that each work reach some total experience, like a cat. I watch my cat. He instructs me. He cannot lie. He cannot disguise his exigency. If he is suspicious he’s suspicious from his whiskers to the tip of his tail.⁵

Beck further explained her idea:

‘How do you put the passion in,’ you ask. Let’s call passion, for simplicity’s sake, heart without which no amount of technique, goodwill, sedulousness, or mere talent can approach. You don’t put the passion in; you stick like a barnacle to your sense of relations, to formal relations; and if you have passion it re-emerges as form.⁶

As was discussed in Chapter 1, in relation to Hofmann’s theory, Matter also believed that the relationships between forms and points in space within the painting (“intervals”) were of foremost concern. Matter’s and Beck’s definition of a successful artwork—one that expressed meaning of both nature and the maker through spatial and formal relations—informed their conception of process.

Matter wrote extensively of Giacometti’s process, and clearly regarded it as a model for herself and other artists. She stated:

Giacometti’s penetrating search into the nature of reality involved an extreme and contemporary self-awareness. What he represented was not merely the thing perceived but himself in the process of apprehending it.... The relationship – as an entity – between himself and reality external

⁵ Beck, “Dear B.” in “A Series of Letters.”

⁶ Beck, “Dear B.” in “A Series of Letters.”

to himself as seen by him he made concrete in terms of space, bringing sculpture into a sphere of representation it had never reached before.⁷

Thus Matter defined representation as subjective, reflecting both the maker and an evolving, shifting relationship. Furthermore, she highlighted the intensity and insurmountable aspect of Giacometti's pursuit. The space between artist and nature was never closed. She quoted Giacometti as stating, "One continues knowing that the closer one gets to the model, the more it withdraws. The distance between myself and the model has a tendency to grow increasingly, unremittingly. It's an endless quest."⁸

How did these lofty standards translate into Matter's and Beck's ideas of process? Both artists seemed to highlight the difficulties—even the crises—associated with working. Although Beck emphasized in the quotation above that "sedulousness" was not enough, certainly extended practice was at the heart of the endeavor. In one letter Beck addressed artist's block, saying, "In the real world it is appropriate to get qualified help from experts. When painting is in crisis nothing can help but work in the studio."⁹ She reminded another "student" that it was only time and experience that would allow him or her to find and define him/herself:

[It is a] fallacy that by combining all schools of pedagogy techniques, styles, tastes the shape of an artist will emerge as the nestling from an egg, intact, ready to take wing... I really don't think it works this way. Something unnamable in the person, perhaps, even untenable, in all this confusion, is the operative yeast. In the apparent welter of contradictions he formulates, becoming aware in momentary flashes of insight, of what he cannot do without, and therefore the right steps and tempo come to him, the very tempo of discovery itself.¹⁰

⁷ Matter, *Alberto Giacometti*, 194.

⁸ Matter, *Alberto Giacometti*, 194.

⁹ Beck, "Dear W," in "A Series of Letters."

¹⁰ Beck, "Dear H," in "A Series of Letters."

Beck's words are similar to one of Matter's critiques of art education. She rejected the common idea that a student should experiment with different stylistic approaches. Matter wrote:

[The student] is supposed to experiment, to shop around for a self, and there are so many possible fits—outside—anywhere more readily than in his own experience, limited as this is to the ground under his own feet. Where is the time for the tireless probing needed to reach that ground? I cannot see that there is any difference between student and artist in terms of freedom. Is not each one, at the deepest level within himself, limited precisely by his innate sensibility and intelligence and the exact degree of knowledge and experience he has accumulated to that particular moment of his life? He can do but what he can do. The promiscuity of experimenting gives him license to evade this deepest level and to achieve easier ready-made results.¹¹

Although Matter espoused searching and becoming aware of the inner self, her teaching was in fact didactic. Students learned to draw like she did, and like everyone else at the school did: with compressed charcoal, an agitated line, and lots of erasure.

Beck poked fun at artists who tried to find themselves outside of the practice, or who were obsessed and distracted by other issues. She said, "I'm convinced that art makes the person, if you're meant to be an artist, not the other way around," and went on to tell a story about a fellow resident at the Yaddo artist colony – a sculptor, who was obsessed with his ideas of healthy food:

He came to meals only to bleat and fish out a few peas and carrots from the stew. He was obsessed, totally, and could think of, or talk about, nothing except his stomach. He may well have improved his body but he did no work while the sacks of plaster and wire lay permanently unopened under the skylight beam. I have never heard his name since.¹²

Persistent and consistent work was regarded as not only essential, but almost romantically revered. Beck spoke of becoming encompassed by time in the studio:

¹¹ Matter, "What's Wrong with U.S. Art Schools?" 57.

¹² Beck, "Dear W.K.," in "A Series of Letters."

Something does happen, at least for me, when I let myself fall into the work-in-progress. The mirrors begin to recede. The exigencies of the recalcitrant material in which I labor begin to absorb me. I fall into illusion, into chimeras. I don't measure any longer my day to day progress, or take the temperature of my confidence. I become a somnambulist. The waters close over me and I am young again.¹³

Matter, even more than Beck, venerated infinite, uninterrupted studio time, and its transformative capacity. She wrote about her experience, inadvertently visiting and interrupting Giacometti while he was at work with a model:

Giacometti was transfigured. His face was illuminated. It was at this moment that all my self-consciousness and shyness fell away, all externalities became irrelevant and we met beyond anything to be said. His eyes had a way of suddenly focusing on one, of suddenly seeing, of totally encompassing and penetrating one. And, at the same time, he, himself, seemed open, transparent, and I felt I saw him. There is no question in my mind that this transcendent state he reached at times when he worked was the source of life for Giacometti. It seems to me a terrible misfortune that fame, with its insistent demands, inevitably imposed itself on his life, perhaps fatally, for all his desire to continue working undisturbed.¹⁴

Matter, like Beck, referred to that point at which one might be consumed by total involvement with the artwork, although for her it seems a more painful state:

To go in each day, I often work into the involvement [with the artwork]. I don't sit and wait - I mean, I make myself go in and work, but hell. But I'm not aside from it... I mean, it's there. I'm impaled. And it's really delightful to do something where you do get away [and not paint]. There is something nice about escaping for a little while.¹⁵

Both Matter and Beck discussed the issue of finishing an artwork. For both, this was a loaded issue; it was not only difficult to finish the artwork but it also could be difficult to determine when the work was finished. For Matter, the determining factor was that the finished painting should transcend its subject matter. She wrote:

¹³ Beck, "Dear E.O.," in "A Series of Letters."

¹⁴ Matter, *Alberto Giacometti*, 216.

¹⁵ Mercedes Matter, interview by Sigmund Koch, transcript, 19-20 December 1986, Aesthetics Research Archive, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, 96.

The minute it comes together, it's so unpredictable. The most exciting thing is the minute when any forms connect, then neither the one or the other are the same. They've become something totally different, and something you could never predict. And that's when it gets interesting... One of my favorite painters is Chardin certainly; he made that rabbit such a rabbit with the fur that you could feel the softness and everything, but it becomes pure geometry in the end.¹⁶

Matter viewed the writer Gustave Flaubert as a literary equivalent who accomplished the task of transcending literal subject matter and bringing his writing to another state:

[Flaubert] always was obsessed with the idea of ... a book about nothing. Yet no one was more meticulous in steeping himself in the subject matter he was going to write about. I think the way he steeped himself in the subject he was going to write about is like contemplating a still life; it's a way of motivating yourself to get into the world of what you're making. And then when it transcends it, it's really not about that anymore. And the only time that it matters is when you transcend it and it becomes transformed.¹⁷

Matter further elaborated this issue: "To me the magical thing is that when you arrive at the correspondence to that thing, it isn't just that you then have reached that, but that by reaching that, the transposition happens in painting, that transfiguration of the work happens through that."¹⁸ This state was so precarious, however, that Matter reported often missing it or destroying it:

The whole canvas is so sensitized that the slightest touch is critical. That's what one is working for; that's where I want to be. Well, when I get there, I don't want to leave and go on to something else which isn't there. .. And I go on, and the most excruciating thing is that imperceptibly it dies, and once it starts to die, I get into such a panic and well, I just kill it.... I had this wonderful moment where it reached – but I never felt it was altogether there, that's the trouble. There's one more thing that could be more, and there it goes. And that's what is so difficult about finishing.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid., 99.

¹⁷ Ibid., 99-100.

¹⁸ Ibid., 205.

¹⁹ Ibid., 90-91.

Beck also admitted that it was often difficult to determine—and stop working—when a painting was finished, although she spoke of it more lightly than Matter did. In a recent interview, Beck said:

I don't know any more [when a painting is finished]. I used to know. I could know when everything was tied up. Now I don't know. I want to open it each time. Closing wasn't, I would say, more important to me, but I could close. I would say I can't close any more.... that I haven't gotten simpler, I've gotten more complex. Now if I had three minutes to do a sketch - I could decide this goes here, that goes there. But if you were going on and on, and remaking - it could go on forever. It would be wonderful to have one that you could go on forever. And the only reason to stop would be that the canvas got icky.²⁰

Beck had also spoken about the issue of finishing about twenty-five years earlier. At that point, she emphasized that completing an artwork was tied to the artist making his/her whole statement. She did not share Matter's view that nature must be transcended; rather she focused on a genuine commitment to full self expression.

Too many painters stop too soon, before they arrive at the place where it hurts, where it hurts to give up something fresh and spontaneous or beautiful. Hence, at best, their work looks open and uninhibited and may have, in fact the unwitting aspect of first statements, but rarely does it convince us of its cause. In the imagination it remains thin. The point at which the picture stops is one of the elements – maybe the most important – which determines an artist's style.²¹

Beck, like Matter, valued the act of questioning as part of the process of making art. She emphasized that this process must be genuine and not simply a superficial style adopted by the artist:

A quality entered the world of paintings' possibilities in the late 19th century – glimpsed in the past though not necessarily avowed – specifically encountered in the late works of Cézanne and Degas and later in Giacometti, a quality I'll call doubt or dissatisfaction, with the attendant need to correct and to correct again, a quality which was integrated into

²⁰ Rosemarie Beck, interview by author, 7 November 2002.

²¹ Rosemarie Beck, "Text of an Informal Talk Originally Delivered in May 1960, at Connecticut Wesleyan University," transcript, Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck, New York.

the painting process itself as an instrument of its very making, of its truest expression. In genuine and original painters this quality wears the mantle of style and enters history as yet another possibility for extension, for biography, for richness and ambiguity. I call this an act of morality. It represents the inevitable predicament of a life work of severest aspiration and self-questioning. Finally it is an avowal of the artist's aesthetics, the morality of his aesthetics – going all the way. When this quality is unearned by a succeeding generation, adopted with attendant breast-beating, it's patently immoral to me. Doubt has to be earned else it's puff or mannerism."²²

Along with doubt, Beck valued a commitment to the true self:

So it has finally come to this: it's the Voice that counts, even above good picture making, or superior consciousness, or the felicities of performance. This voice over which we have only little glimpses, loses its efficacy when we chase after it, and its persuasiveness diminishes in proportion as we become self-imitators. To be an artist seems to require great trust, a kind of naïveté, and the most difficult of all tasks – especially in the face of so much to learn, so much to attempt – sincerity to one's inner rhythms and exhortations, and appetites, loves, needs, and perhaps, above all, the need to confess or tell the secret however disguised.²³

Beck and Matter seemed to set nearly impossible standards for process and the finished artwork. Nevertheless, Beck valued some playfulness, and other creative pursuits as aesthetic tools. She in fact perceived these activities as valuable ways to avoid the constant doubt which could plague or hinder the serious artist. Beck shared an anecdote about Guston along these lines:

He was heard to moan frequently about the unending stream of ceremonies in the life of a child. But, in fact, grudgingly at first, I think he welcomed these occasions because they always elicited from him enchanting, non-serious decorations. One day he presented his little daughter to us early Halloween morning before he was to drive her to the school party. The evening before had been riotously spent inventing a witch's costume consisting of a marvelously illuminated sheet with figures and imagery, a fabulous hat and a carved jack-o-lantern in the shape of a cat. I've never forgotten the sensuality, the rightness, of that carving. Well Philip spent a restless day waiting for Ingie to come home from school. She was...a little crest-fallen. The boy whose mother had bought

²² Beck, "Dear W.," in "A Series of Letters."

²³ Beck, "Dear E.," in "A Series of Letters."

a skeleton costume at the five and dime won the prize. No matter. Philip was rehearsing, probably unbeknownst to himself, his own future imagery and iconography later to surface in the rich forms we know in his last work.²⁴

Alongside her painting and drawing, Beck developed a prolific practice of embroidery work. Her small embroideries were based on the same subjects as her paintings: figure groups from mythological and literary themes. They often seem freer and looser than her paintings, with bolder color saturation. Beck was clear during her lifetime that she did not consider them on the same artistic level as her paintings.²⁵ However, perhaps her embroideries functioned in the same way as she describes Guston's child's costume. They may have given her an outlet to experiment and try out compositions without self-censure.

Matter would make process a key element of her teaching. In her 1963 critique of art education, she made a compelling case for uninterrupted time in the studio, and for the conditions that allow students to find their inner voice – and to question themselves and their work without the pressure of immediate results. She also took a stab at the pedagogical legacy of Josef Albers (without mentioning his name), writing:

It is a wonder if a student even meets himself in the hall as he rushes by. And it seems to me that this irresponsible prying about in the means of expression themselves, separately, is indecent. It becomes an impediment to painting because it tends to replace the urge to be true, to pursue the matching of experience regardless of appearances and difficulties involved, with a concern for how things look or how well they work. A triangle discovered and wrested from the points of tension in a curving torso and definitive of its volume becomes real to a student, becomes known as experience. A triangle cut out and juxtaposed in an arbitrary exercise is of indifferent value. A color sensation perceived and matched

²⁴ Beck, "Dear L.," in "A Series of Letters."

²⁵ Beck discusses this in an interview with Kim Levin, "Conversation with Rosemarie Beck," *Arts Magazine* 53 (February 1979): 106.

in equivalence within the context of experience yields more understanding of color than dozens of parlor-game exercises.²⁶

Matter's article catalyzed the founding of the New York Studio School. A group of her students from the Pratt Institute and the Philadelphia College of Art, including Marc Zimetbaum and Chuck O'Connor, insisted that she found a school based on the ideal she outlined in print. Students agreed with Matter's charges, that they simply did not have enough uninterrupted time in the studio. O'Connor, who framed the founding of the School in the larger context of 1960s student agitation and interest in alternative education, recalled his frustration that a sculpture class at Pratt, taught by Sidney Geist in his first year, had reverted to a three-dimensional design course taught by a graduate student in the second year.²⁷ The frustration that students felt at having studio time interrupted by degree requirements, was corroborated even in a critical response to Matter's article, published simultaneously in *Art News*, by Howard Conant. Conant, who was then chairman of the art department at New York University, criticized Matter for a "hankering-for-the-good-old days conservatism," but writes that "one must openly admit the accuracy of Miss Matter's pointed criticism of such undeniable weaknesses in art education programs as fragmented curricula, too-short classes, a stress on quick results and experiments rather than long-term projects..."²⁸

To announce the School, a poster was created by Herbert Matter. It read "A School Founded by Students Out of a Common Need," and reproduced three images: a Cézanne, a Giacometti and a Poussin. It listed the original faculty: Matter, Charles Cajori, Nicholas Carone, Sidney Geist, Philip Guston (1913-1980), John Heliker (1909-2000),

²⁶ Matter, "What's Wrong with U.S. Art Schools?" 56-57.

²⁷ Chuck O'Connor, interview by author, 15 September 2004.

²⁸ Howard Conant, "What's Wrong with U.S. Art Schools? A Reply," *Art News* (September 1963): 41, 43, 58.

Alex Katz, Earl Kerkam (1891-1965), George Spaventa (1918-1978), and Esteban Vicente (1903-2001), as well as Meyer Schapiro (1904-1996) for art history. Gabriel Laderman and Edwin Dickinson were also listed, although they did not ultimately join the faculty. Dore Ashton published an article in *Studio International* announcing the School's founding, which attracted the initial group of applications from around the country.²⁹

The Pratt administration, concerned about bad publicity, tried to dissuade Zimetbaum and O'Connor from starting another school by telling them they could design their own curriculum and still graduate. By this time, however, the students were determined. The group eventually located a loft downtown at 646 Broadway. Students worked together to construct the worktables and modeling platforms, and, within a few months, in September 1964, the School was open. The space was divided by movable walls into separate areas for painting, sculpture, and drawing.

In the first year, the School was run with a communal spirit: it had no director or financial manager; students had keys to the space and worked there at all hours unsupervised. The students themselves decided on the tuition of five hundred dollars a year and helped to choose the faculty. By November, however, money ran out. The Kaplan Fund came to their aid, with the proviso that a financial advisor be hired. This role was filled by Mrs. Henry Epstein, a friend of Vicente's. Cajori recalls the passionate debates about how the School should be run, which took place at Mrs. Epstein's art-filled Fifth Avenue apartment.³⁰

²⁹ Dore Ashton, "Opening of the New York Studio School," *Studio International* 168 (September 1964): 118.

³⁰ Charles Cajori, interview by author, 14 September 2004.

The School spent two and a half years in the Broadway loft. When Matter began looking for a larger space, she learned that the former Whitney Museum building on Eighth Street was available. Matter was determined to have it for the School. It became possible with the tragic death of a twenty-one year-old student, Claudia Stone, who left the School a significant portion of her inheritance. It is in this building, now a national landmark, that the School remains: a labyrinth of inner staircases and rooms, which include Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's legendary salon, with its chimneypiece of wild, fiery sculpted plasterwork.

Drawing was indeed the core of the School's educational system. The still life—and the actual set-up—were the focus of Matter's teaching and her own art. Through careful, exact arrangement of objects, Matter hoped to create an awareness of pictorial dynamics and spatial relationships. She was known to search out the most beautiful and luxurious elements for her set-ups, irrespective of cost. With Matter, one learned to draw in a certain way through intense engagement with the still-life elements. The arrangement itself—along with some awareness of Matter's own way of drawing, and group osmosis—became the instructional device. A founding student, Marjorie Kramer (who donated a portion of her small inheritance to pay the School's first month's rent of \$500), recalls that in Matter's still-life set-ups, “there was electricity between the different points in space. I didn't know how she did that, like when you look at a Giacometti drawing or a Cézanne still life, when you worked from her still-life set-ups, you sensed that it was a very personal statement.”³¹

Cézanne and Giacometti were the ethical and aesthetic models of the School, in terms of the intense, seeking nature of their process. Matter's belief, that every mark had

³³ Marjorie Kramer, interview by author, 5 August 2004.

consequences, led to a working method that some found painful in its intensity. Sidney Geist was critical of this teaching method for being too much about erasure, because it can transmit an unfortunate message to students to, in his words, “work, work, suffer, fail.”³² The result, of course, was also a mannered Studio School “style,” of anguished drawing with compressed charcoal, replete with smudges and erasure. However, for Matter, erasure was a crucial form of questioning and refining. In a 1966 article that functioned as a manifesto for the importance of the practice of drawing, Matter writes that “the primary character” of drawing is “its attritional process of defining, its adjustments toward precision, which sharpen awareness and forge visual consciousness.”³³ Matter’s students were expected to focus on awareness of points in space and of achieving rhythm in their drawings through the organization of forms. This was the essence, and singular focus of her teaching.

Matter’s involvement with the school became a forum through which she could extend her message and theory beyond her own work. The school, which remains on Eighth Street today, and has been under the leadership of Graham Nickson since 1989, consumed a great deal of Matter’s energy and time.³⁴ It became, in a certain way, an aesthetic project as primary as her drawing and painting.

Beck approached her involvement with art education differently. For her, teaching was not as consuming an endeavor and likely not an artistic output. Neither did

³² Sidney Geist, interview by author, 28 September 2004.

³³ Matter, “Drawing,” in *Notes from the New York Studio School*, November 1968, Archives, New York Studio School.

³⁴ The New York Studio School, under Matter’s direction, was never a degree-granting institution. Students were expected to study there to become artists, rather than “professionals.” This also kept the students free from what Matter considered onerous requirements that distracted from sustained studio practice. Recently, however, under Graham Nickson’s leadership, the New York Studio School began to offer a Master of Fine Arts degree program.

she approach it in such a singularly didactic manner. She preferred to be open to her students' problems and conflicts. Her *Letters* reflect this attitude.

Beck taught at Vassar and Middlebury Colleges in the late 1950s, at Queens College from 1967-1992, and at the New York Studio School from the 1990s until her death in 2002. Beck had a complex relationship with Matter during their time together at the Studio School. Beck cared deeply about what Matter thought of her work, and wanted her to like it. She greatly respected Matter's work, her intelligence, taste and knowledge, and went out of her way to help Matter and the school by raising money, even though she was frugal but was aware of Matter's tendency to spend exorbitantly. Matter and Beck, despite some similar attitudes about process, had some important aesthetic differences of opinion. Beck, over the years, developed her opinion that the painting must retain something concrete, in terms of a referent to nature. Matter, although she worked from nature, did not feel it had to retain recognizable elements. Earlier I discussed Matter's belief that the painting was complete when it was completely transformed, when it transitioned from a descriptive state into abstract geometry. It then transcended reality. Matter probably felt that Beck's work always contained too much narrative, and too much depth, in the way figures and landscapes were rendered. And although they shared many theoretical ideas about process, they worked very differently. In a given drawing session with a model, Beck might have, by the end, thirty sheets in process, in which she tried out different ideas. Matter would work on the same sheet, constantly correcting and refining.³⁵

Matter spoke, in 1986, of "getting more and more involved in how I make still-lives," of a certain example where she spent "a whole week, at least, getting what I

³⁵ Martha Hayden, in conversation with author, 21 August 2009.

wanted into the still life,” and occasionally getting “annoyed that I do it too much...But still it matters a lot to me.” Her studio was filled with objects like coral, bones, pieces of wood, and dried flowers for constructing the still life. Although she says, “the associations that go with forms in the still life are more interesting and relevant than the objects that provoke them,” she admits “certain objects excite me visually, and I like to use them again and again.” She tells how she obtained cow skulls when she was living in Connecticut, and a dairy farm, “which was so peaceful and lovely and happy... changed to having cattle that they slaughtered...They’d have a big ceremony of slaughtering, and then they’d throw the heads in the field in certain places, and I’d pick up the heads after a year or so when they’d been cleaned up by all the birds and insects.”³⁶ Matter’s feelings about the real still life objects, as opposed to their representation in art, are reminiscent of an attitude of Giacometti’s that she admired. In her text on the artist, Matter wrote:

Objects, he realized, were not sculpture. In Stampa Giacometti gave us a beautiful dissertation about this over lunch. ‘An object,’ he said, taking hold of the wine bottle, ‘is perfect in itself; a work of art can never be perfect since it represents a particular vision, only one view of reality, while so many others are equally valid. But if a bottle breaks, it is nothing at all; whereas a work of art broken, damaged, so long as it still projects the vision it represents, continues to exist. An object does not represent a vision, it is merely a thing in itself.’

Matter made drawings in charcoal, often on canvas, because as she reports, she “just wore right through paper with erasures and changes.” Canvases were mounted on board; when she worked in a larger format her husband did the work of shellacking the thin plywood, and gluing on the canvas. She recalls she “had quite a time to find someone after he died who would do it. But then, one can go on working [on the same drawings] pretty long. She fixed them with the least toxic fixative she could find and

³⁶ Matter, interview by Koch, 90.

jokes that she once tried fixing a drawing with skim milk. Matter's approach to drawing made the practice monumental – they were not preparatory exercises, but works in their own right, in terms of scale and the duration of the working period. Paintings also, of course, were labored over: it was not uncommon for her to spend years on a painting; she said “some take up to ten, twelve years.”³⁷

Martha Hayden, an artist, close friend of Beck's, and her former studio-mate, who is now the vice-president of the Rosemarie Beck foundation, explained the differences between Beck's and Matter's approach to drawing:

Rosemarie [unlike Matter] never drew in the Hofmann manner, with chamois, charcoal and eraser. Hofmann would have a model in one seated pose for two weeks. The model wasn't drawn in isolation; she was posed in some kind of setup. They drew over and over on one piece of paper. It wasn't a question of putting in something and then erasing it, it was a constant shifting of everything until a rhythm presented itself. You couldn't put it in there deliberately. The paper got dark after awhile, and the eraser was used to pick out the edges of planes. Anything like an outline was avoided. . . . When Mercedes drew, she created the space (relationships) in the air outside the (solid) objects. Rosemarie did the opposite. Rosemarie drew the object (the figure) and from the particular, created the space around it. She drew with lines, segmented, tentative at first, then stronger and more located. She drew with pencil, ink, sometimes charcoal pencil, never with soft charcoal and chamois.³⁸

To compare Matter's and Beck's process in practical terms: Matter's estate includes about three to four hundred paintings and five hundred drawings, while the Beck estate, to date, has counted more than 3000 paintings, as well as thousands of drawings.³⁹ Beck approached drawing more as a preliminary step; drawing was the time she worked from a model, to get a pose she needed for a specific subject. She worked in groups of

³⁷ Ibid., 84.

³⁸ Martha Hayden (Vice-President of the Rosemarie Beck Foundation), 24 February 2010, *Rosemarie and Mercedes* (email to author).

³⁹ Shannon McEneaney of Mark Borghi Fine Art (representative of the Mercedes Matter estate), 21 August 2009, *Mercedes Matter* (email to author); Martha Hayden (Vice-President of the Rosemarie Beck Foundation), 24 August 2009, *Rosemarie & Mercedes Matter* (email to author).

paintings around a particular theme, inspired by literary / mythological subjects like *Orpheus* or *The Tempest*. An article published in *American Artist* in 1978 described some aspects of her working process, including a quotation on the subject by Beck: “Beck usually starts with an invented composition and uses reality as a reference for clarifying and refining her work. She considers her work to be more conceived than a composite of studies from life. It is important for Beck to ‘constantly refurbish the imagination and not to constantly use poses directly from life.’”⁴⁰ Beck also expressed a different view of drawing than Matter when she stated:

In general, for myself, I prefer in drawing the small format, the sketch, the improvised, the uncalculated, the on-going, rather than the more determined, orchestrated, or elaborating solutions. The drawing with the greater breadth than finish or focus, is more provoking. I draw for the sense of the whole, for theme and rhythm, out of curiosity sometimes, for information, for particular poses or details. And most fruitfully, to give my hand the lead, to outwit my serious intentions, to tell me what I know (or didn't know I knew), and to find ways to be useful to myself.⁴¹

Beck used drawing—and perhaps other aesthetic outlets like embroidery—as a way to escape self-doubt and questioning. She also used self-imposed limitations, like working from a specific narrative theme, or restricting her palette to certain colors, to keep inspiration and spontaneity alive. Although she valued doubt and believed in the whole, she worried that a surfeit of it would ultimately inhibit the artist. In fact, she related to this aspect of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. She wrote about Orpheus:

By the very eloquence of his needfulness, he is finally able to persuade the powers of the underworld to return Eurydice to him on the condition that he not look back – that is not succumb to any of the devils of self-questioning, doubt, or fear that sap primitive vitality. But Orpheus cannot

⁴⁰ Lorraine Gilligan, “Rosemarie Beck: A Painter’s Reality,” *American Artist* 42 (September 1978): 48.

⁴¹ Rosemarie Beck, “Panel on Drawing, Academy,” Undated manuscript for a lecture, Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck, New York.

resist testing and proving, and his Eurydice is taken from him for the last time.⁴²

Beck indeed valued the finishing of one's painting, and understood it was ultimately important to let go of self-questioning to make this possible. In other words, although the myth was inspiration, she wanted to escape the myth in her own reality. Matter, on the other hand, was attached to an "ideal of the artist" in an almost mythical way. The complete artwork was transcendent – nearly impossible, and the voyage or process was of ultimate importance.

Form & Meaning: Defining Representation: Louis Finkelstein and Fairfield Porter

Both Matter and Beck were close friends of Louis Finkelstein, the painter, educator, intellectual, and prolific writer on art. Finkelstein taught at the New York Studio School, both in its early years (the 1960s), and later, in the 1990s. He also gave regular lectures at the School, as part of its evening lecture series. In addition to the Studio School, he taught at the Philadelphia College of Art, Yale School of Art, and he was the head of the art department at Queens College (City University of New York) for more than twenty-five years. He hired Beck to teach at Queens under his chairmanship. Finkelstein greatly admired Matter's work and published a text on her work in *Modern Painters* as well as the foreword to the Giacometti monograph she authored with her husband's photography.⁴³

⁴² Rosemarie Beck, Untitled, undated manuscript for a lecture on her work and career, Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck, New York.

⁴³ Louis Finkelstein, "The Paintings and Drawings of Mercedes Matter," *Modern Painters* 4 (Autumn 1991), 39-42; *Alberto Giacometti*. Photographed by Herbert Matter, text by Mercedes Matter, foreword by Louis Finkelstein and an introduction by Andrew Forge (New York: Abrams, 1987).

Finkelstein's 1975 exhibition at Ingber Gallery, *Painterly Representation*, included work by Beck, Bell, Blaine, De Niro, Georges, Matthiasdottir, Matter, and Resika, as well as Raoul Middleman, Wolf Kahn, Fairfield Porter, Albert York, Elias Goldberg, Herman Rose, Gretna Campbell, and himself. Through the show, and with his catalogue essay, Finkelstein established his own grouping of this "generation" of artists and codified their shared goals.⁴⁴

Finkelstein was an idiosyncratic writer, and his lectures and writings are not easy on the reader or listener – they are expansive, verbose, and multi-directional. Recently several of his essays have been published in an anthology edited by Mindy Aloff with an introduction by Jock Ireland.⁴⁵ Despite their challenges, Finkelstein's writings are invaluable, in terms of how he links the formal aspects of the artwork to meaning. His attention to the formal is unparalleled in the writing of the other critics and theorists who wrote about these painters, especially those who were not practicing artists themselves.

In the catalog essay "Painterly Representation," Finkelstein defined representational painting as a way to achieve a totality of past, present, and future in one image. It is a way, in other words, to achieve what is impossible in life. He wrote, "The service of painting becomes crucial in that of all the arts it is the only perfectly static one, whose problems, means and values are bound up in the transfixing into pure and complete simultaneity that which we were only able to know because it was moving."

⁴⁴ Louis Finkelstein, "Painterly Representation," Exh. cat., *Painterly Representation*, Ingber Gallery, New York, 1975. The exhibition was curated by Louis Finkelstein, and traveled to several American colleges and museums between 1976-1978. Patricia Mainardi assisted in the preparation of the catalogue and exhibition.

⁴⁵ Mindy Aloff, ed., *The Unpicturelikeness of Pollock, Soutine and Others: Selected Writings and Talks by Louis Finkelstein* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2008).

Furthermore, Finkelstein tied this issue to the predominant style of the group – their “painterly” quality, in that it relates to the passage of time. He wrote:

That kind of representation we call painterly comes into being precisely because of this process sense of things. The time which is transfixed is not the outward time of day or even the process of laying on the paint so as to produce virtuosic marks of the process, but rather the flowing of consciousness in interaction with first the resistances and challenges which the world of appearances presents to our grasp, and secondly with the ways pictorial language itself generates metaphors of the meanings of things and of state of mind.⁴⁶

In this way, Finkelstein linked their painterly style to the artistic problem of capturing time and synthesizing nature within a single image. We see the passage of time not only through what is represented, but also the passage of the artist’s time as he or she makes aesthetic choices.

Finkelstein was adept at not simply describing the formal qualities in the painting, but at understanding these aesthetic choices and the artist’s essential goals. In “Painterly Representation,” Finkelstein showed how the artist’s unique way of using and manipulating form creates meaning. Rather than focusing on what specifically is represented in the painting, the choice of imagery, or its lifelike-ness, as so many critics and writers might, Finkelstein showed how meaning (“re-presentation”) is something else entirely. It is the artist’s own vision and intent and it evolves out of their sensibility, their mark-making, their choices, and their process.

Finkelstein in fact wrote about both Matter and Beck in this essay. His admiration of Matter was clear in his discussion of the painting included in this exhibition, *Untitled*, 1961 (fig. 4.1). Finkelstein placed the painting in the context of the existentialist process Matter espoused. He perceived her understanding representational

⁴⁶ Finkelstein, “Painterly Representation.”

painting in “a structural sense finding its support in relations found in the world” (as opposed to a “purely visual correspondence”). He wrote, “The striving is to make this an absolute state in itself, hence transcendent...” He noted that it is, in fact, not obvious at first glance what is represented at all, or even that this is a still life. Rather, Finkelstein found in her work references to how “an object articulates space around and between it and other elements.” He noted one particular apple represented in the painting, compressed into a slot of space that Finkelstein saw as moving back, up and inward simultaneously. He considered that it thus has “the same function plastically as the centermost angel in El Greco’s *Burial of Count Orgaz*, there mediating between the material world and the divine, here fulfilling Merleau-Ponty’s notion of to see (voir) being to have (avoir), i.e. to possess, at a distance.”⁴⁷ Finkelstein thus saw Matter as fulfilling her aesthetic goals in terms of process, as discussed above: meaning (and completeness) is created by achieving a transcendent state in which forms become a reality greater than reality itself.

Similarly, he understood Beck’s insistence that the artist’s voice and expression is communicated primarily through formal arrangement, working in harmony with narrative. He wrote that in her work “the narrative action of the subject does not come first and then dictate a plastic theme, but rather the reverse. The rhythmic distribution of the painting becomes a vehicle for feeling which finds its specification through the subject.” His understanding of Beck’s use of representation was indeed in line with her own views, including her artistic process and her theory discussed earlier. Although she worked from literary and classical subjects, she often used isolated passages that had a certain personal resonance, rather than focusing on plot or narrative. His interpretation is

⁴⁷ Ibid.

evocative of Beck's own words, "I get a rhythm or combination of shapes that need to be embodied in a kind of figuration which is not merely a piece of nature, nude, or still-life but which corresponds to the analogic or metaphoric processes by which I live from day to day."⁴⁸

In discussions of other peers, Finkelstein was similarly able to pinpoint what the artist him/herself likely conceived as their essential aesthetic goals. For example, in writing on De Niro, he referred to the painter's "signature style" of gestural, bravura brushwork but linked it to his personality and approach to the subject. De Niro had apparently started the painting included in the exhibition, *Buffalo Landscape*, 1969-74 (fig. 4.2), in 1969, but returned to it, and completed it, in 1974. Finkelstein discussed how this combination of a rapid, direct approach, along with a reflective period affected the work:

Robert De Niro's 'Buffalo Landscape' seems highly condensed and impulsive, the product of pure will. . . . In this case the image of the space, the weight and placement of the resonating yellows and blues, the various gestural profiles, were the result of a conviction which only over time realized on the one hand the meaning of color and shape interaction, and on the other what the experiencing of the particular motif. . . . held within it which could touch a basic and integral purpose of the artist.

Finkelstein linked this process to Matisse—his "synthesizing method,"—in which after the original working, form and color came to express aspects of nature in a new way. Few have written about De Niro in this way, but in fact the duality of a direct attack, along with sustained meditation, was essential to his process. Not only might De Niro return to the same painting to rework it, but also his habit of reworking a few similar motifs over years and even the entirety of his career, speaks to this issue. Finkelstein

⁴⁸ Rosemarie Beck, *Untitled*, undated manuscript for a lecture on her work and career, Archives, Estate of Rosemarie Beck, New York.

articulated that De Niro gained new insights into the motif by reflecting on his depictions of it.⁴⁹

In Blaine, Finkelstein found almost the opposite: an interest in conveying “directly distilled sensation.” In her painting *Green Wall and Yellow Table with Still Life*, 1974 (fig. 4.3), he discussed the Gauguin-like use of non-local color to express experience and to balance and influence the other colors in the painting. He wrote about the “poetic tension” created by the use of green and the “consequences” its use has on the other parts of the picture. In Chapter 1, I discussed the relationship of Blaine’s work to Hofmann’s writings on color and light in the *Painter’s Primer*. There I discussed Hofmann’s theories about the poetic and spiritual meaning of color and their dependence on spatial placement and relationship to other colors within the painting. I also quoted Blaine discussing her desire for the “free use of color” to provide “equivalents of sensations.”⁵⁰ This is the same issue that Finkelstein highlighted in her work, and an essential element of Blaine’s project as a painter.

Finkelstein discussed Bell’s and Matthiasdottir’s work with a similar handle on the artist’s central goals and “personalities.” In Bell, he noted the use of a “concert of formal elements,” and linear rhythms that define space through their ebb and flow. He likened Bell’s work in this way to the “sacred conversations of Bellini and Titian.” The almost musical orchestration to which Finkelstein referred is the same issue I discussed in Bell’s theory and work in Chapter 2. Bell—echoing principles espoused by Hélión—used figural gesture to animate the surface, create paths for the viewer’s gaze, and ultimately, to create meaning. Matthiasdottir was represented in the exhibition by her

⁴⁹ Finkelstein, “Painterly Representation.”

⁵⁰ Blaine, interview with Martica Sawin, as cited in Martica Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 102.

painting *Still Life with Meat*, 1974 (fig. 4.4), and Finkelstein discussed the weightiness of the individual objects and an overall materiality created by her sure and decisive painterly attack.⁵¹

In Resika, Finkelstein highlighted a condensation of feelings, a clarity of forms that combines the classical with a direct, modern consciousness, and ultimately, finds the sublime. This is how Finkelstein made sense of Resika's painting, *Meadow, Skowhegan*, 1973 (fig. 4.5), which took on the tradition of the pastoral in contemporary art. The sublime, the romantic, the exuberant, are indeed central to Resika's oeuvre. I discussed the romantic strain in his work in Chapter 2. As Resika's work developed, and as he became more involved in the landscape, this romanticism began to include the sense of what Finkelstein terms "sublime," and in recent years Resika's work has become even more overtly exuberant.

Finkelstein's view of representation was that meaning was created not through degrees of verisimilitude, but through form and the artist's unique vision. Finkelstein's audience was limited in that he did not publish widely, and many found his lectures and essays unwieldy and dense. But especially in comparing him to those discussed previously, we can see the uniqueness of his contribution. For example, Thomas Hess, despite attention to formal aspects of the painting, directed his attention to categorizing and defining generational tendencies. He compared artists to their elders and mentors and found points of commonality and difference among peers. He located philosophical issues that defined the age and affected aesthetic choices. The formal elements of the painting thus assumed broader meanings than they did for Finkelstein, who allowed the object to speak more for itself and less for a generational zeitgeist.

⁵¹ Finkelstein, "Painterly Representation."

It is especially interesting to compare Finkelstein to another important artist-critic of his time: Fairfield Porter. Porter achieved a much wider readership, as a regular contributor to *Art News* (where he wrote under the editorship of Hess, having been recommended by Elaine de Kooning), and later to *The Nation*. In addition, he eventually received wider recognition as a painter. His art criticism has been anthologized by Rackstraw Downes in the collection, *Art in its Own Terms 1955-1975*.⁵² Porter differed from Finkelstein in that he was less detailed in his analysis of formal attributes, instead preferring to present an overall characterization that located an aesthetic core of the artwork. He also used an artist's work to contemplate his own aesthetic and philosophical ideas like the nature of realism or the relevance of beauty. Porter was more poetic and more interested in relating the painter to an artistic "type," suggesting their contribution to the contemporary art scene and art history. Porter was also a very different writer than Finkelstein. His prose was succinct and direct, didactic, yet quietly evocative. As mentioned earlier, he positioned himself against what he termed "manifesto criticism"—an *a priori* judgment about what form of art should dominate—so his criticism often seemed open-minded and individual. However, he expressed strong and often unpopular opinions. In the previous chapter I mentioned how Porter suggested that in none of the history of American art could he find truly successful figurative painting; he also suggested that no American painter had truly mastered the oil medium, when he wrote of a young painter, "He solves the problem of the oil medium in the usual Anglosaxon way – he avoids it."⁵³ Porter was a master of blithe, to the point, phrasing that could at times conjure powerful images and associations but at other times could completely dismiss an

⁵² Rackstraw Downes, ed., *Fairfield Porter: Art in its Own Terms: Selected Criticism 1935-1975* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1979).

⁵³ John T. Spike, *Fairfield Porter: An American Classic* (New York, Abrams, 1992), 94.

artist's production. In terms of associations with the group of painters treated here, Porter was closest to Paul Georges; but his circle of friends veered more to the poet-photographer-painters group like Rudy Burkhardt, Kenneth Rexroth, Frank O'Hara, Larry Rivers, John Ashbery and Alex Katz.

A group of Porter's reviews, published around 1960, all contemplated issues of realism and abstraction while they analyzed the work of painters such as Alex Katz, Elmer Bischoff, Robert Goodnough, Jasper Johns, Jane Freilicher and Georges. In this series of writings, Porter, like Finkelstein, complicated the definition of representation. He called Katz a "realist" and then used his essay to deconstruct our preconceptions about realism, testing the reader with paradoxes like: "you recognize every detail in his paintings, and the whole too, though the whole takes precedence and the detail may only be an area of color, in short, abstract."⁵⁴ He continued:

[Katz] does not need to say that the deepest reality is in visual experience, or in the paint medium as the medium for nature, or in communication, or emotion, or the image, or in art as aesthetics – the ivory tower. Katz uses all these things, and he uses nothing too much – appearance, colors of pigments, geometry, anything you can name. He leaves out nothing that pertains to the nature of painting in favor of emphasis on one part... He is not overwhelmed by nature but stands outside it; it is outside him and includes his subjectivity.⁵⁵

Porter thus made quite a case for Katz's ability to encompass both an expert abstract handling of form and a sensitive, evocative communication of nature. He suggested that for "realist" painters of this generation, it was crucial to accomplish both these tasks equally well.

In another review, Porter compared two exhibitions, those of Elmer Bischoff and Robert Goodnough, using the occasion to discuss the complexity of comparing realism

⁵⁴ Fairfield Porter, "A Realist," *The Nation*, 1 October 1960.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

and “non-objectivity.” He found our superficial categorizations of these painters in fact inaccurate. Bischoff, although “figurative,” made generalities, and allowed forms to almost evaporate in their loose paint handling and in his process – Porter called it performance oriented, and romantic in the sense of celebrating himself above all. On the other hand, he writes that Goodnough, who is an abstract painter, “particularizes the idea... Out of concepts he makes equivalents of concreteness.”⁵⁶ Porter described the individuated, strong forms in Goodnough’s work, and the sense of an unvarying size and weight. With abstract form, Goodnough was able to evoke all of nature. Porter’s thesis, that verisimilitude does not make a “realist,” falls in line with much of the theory discussed previously that suggests the complex relationships and lack of polarity between abstraction and representation.

Porter defined “realism” as successfully achieving and communicating concreteness, specificity, and individuality. In a 1960 essay, “Kinds of Beauty,” he challenged common-held associations of “beauty” with abstraction, simplicity and coherence. In discussing Jane Freilicher’s landscapes, Porter wrote:

As a whole nature is irregular and it is partly in its specific irregularity that it reveals its presence. Being tied to no place, except near the sea, the irregularity looks abstract. So beauty does not mean for her clarity and logic, but the total fact that nature is naturally specific and never the same.⁵⁷

Along the same lines, Porter commended Georges for prioritizing individuality in his paintings above all, and thus for finding beauty in reality. He wrote of Georges’s self portraits:

He uses tonal contrasts and close values and a freely decided choice of colors... His paint is thick and juicy... All these means, any means at all,

⁵⁶ Fairfield Porter, “Non Objectivity and Realism,” *The Nation*, 23 January 1960.

⁵⁷ Fairfield Porter, “Kinds of Beauty,” *The Nation*, 19 March 1960.

and the variety of individualities in one single model, impress on you the reality of the person looking out at you... Realist painters... seem to see only one arbitrary, even abstract concept of the way man should look. They see a lay figure or a caricature: they do not see without prejudice. Because Georges gets an unprecedented and always different individuality, he can be called one of the few true realists painting in New York.⁵⁸

Interestingly, Finkelstein had expressed some very similar ideas about Georges's work in "Painterly Representation." Of the painting exhibited (see fig. 4.6), Finkelstein wrote:

Paul Georges' *Portrait of Yvette* is about feeling and gesture, but in the condensed medium of a single glance. With apparently artless spontaneity, subordinate forms are scarcely indicated, while sensitively articulated edges and planes create in the description of the volumes of the head, a unifying gesture which becomes a presence, a consciousness, a sense of self versus another... The few clues, easily and frankly handled with no rhetoric, no problems, are haunting and complex when unified by expression in a way which would be obliterated in a more completely specified work.⁵⁹

Both writers found in Georges a deep communicative reality, specific to an individual and singular moment in time, achieved through a lyrical, painterly, rapidly worked approach. Although the two writers had similar impressions of Georges, their language was quite different, and they used their conclusions to different ends. Porter used the example of Georges to philosophize about the state of realist painting in contemporary art and Georges's place in it. Finkelstein compared Georges to other painters only in the sense of how he uses form; he focused on articulating the visual, specifying how form created meaning.

Porter was direct and to the point; Finkelstein dwelled and wandered through his analysis. Porter's directness and his clear and individual point of view made for a

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Finkelstein, "Painterly Representation."

successful career as a critic. He began publishing early on and from the beginning he took a contrarian, non-conformist position. In 1941, he wrote a letter to the editor of *The Kenyon Review*, following its publication of a criticism of Picasso by the painter Wyndham Lewis, complaining:

The article shows that Lewis paints from a written program, concocted in advance. He is a manifesto painter. In the end of his article he compares Picasso with his manifesto, and finds Picasso lacking. Picasso is not a manifesto painter, and the end of the article shows that what is at issue is the manifesto by Lewis, nothing else.⁶⁰

Porter also enjoyed intellectual debate with Clement Greenberg in published letters to the editor. Porter considered Greenberg a “manifesto critic.” In the late 1940s, Porter witnessed an encounter between Greenberg and Willem de Kooning. De Kooning had begun painting his *Woman* series and Greenberg said to de Kooning, “You can’t paint this way nowadays. You can’t paint figuratively today.” At that moment, Porter resolved to be a figurative painter. He recalled, “I thought if that’s what he says I think I will do exactly what he says I can’t do. That’s all I will do. I might have become an abstract painter except for that.”⁶¹

Porter continued to explore the problems of “manifesto criticism” throughout his career. In 1964, he published in *The Nation* one of his strongest and most extensive texts on the subject, “Against Idealism.” A manifesto, he wrote, limits the full potential of artistic expression. He traced the problem through the successive movements of Impressionism (which claimed to rely on sight alone), Cubism (which moved away from sight and into geometry), Constructivism (more generalized geometry), the Bauhaus (art

⁶⁰ Fairfield Porter, “Wyndham Lewis on Picasso,” Letter to the editor. *Kenyon Review* 3, no. 4 (Autumn 1941): 500-502.

⁶¹ Fairfield Porter, interview by Paul Cummings, Archives of American Art Oral History Project, 6 June 1968, transcript, Archives of American Art, New York.

became a science subservient to industry), and Neo-Plasticism (complete distillation into primary colors and line). Porter wrote, “In all of these schools art is placed under the control of some limiting idea.” Porter wondered why the artist limits him/herself so. He began the essay, “Berenson said that it was an English and American vice to try to limit the means of your expression,” and urged the artist to forego such science and philosophy. “Art permits you to accept illogical immediacy, and in doing so releases you from chasing after the distant and the ideal. When this occurs, the effect is exalting.”⁶²

Porter’s perspective was radical, a challenge to the establishment, in that our common art historical narrative is teleological, thriving on precise philosophical definitions of movements and their succession through time. Like the other theorists who have been discussed (Hofmann, Héliou, Hess) Porter complicated the abstraction-representation divide and showed how non-linear artistic developments can be. However, as has also been discussed, these challenges did not fully penetrate the establishment; the Hegelian interpretation of abstraction as the ultimate progression was too widely-held.

Both Porter and Finkelstein used their platforms to express how form itself is the cornerstone of representation or “realism.” In other words, nature was best communicated through artistic, formal means rather than illustrative ones. Porter maintained, for instance, that “Rembrandt created a total world of greater human depth and breadth than any other visual artist.” He did so by creating a pictorial universe where every aspect contributes and is dependent on the whole. He did not provide details or bits of information, but instead he communicated a sum-total. Porter wrote:

⁶² Fairfield Porter, “Against Idealism,” *Art and Literature*, no. 2 (Summer 1964).

In a Rembrandt drawing a detail is almost meaningless by itself, and there is no form separate from the form of the whole. A line, or lines, or the wash, tells where, before it tells what: where in space, where in action and where in dramatic significance.... A figure is analyzed in terms of its presence, which precedes its articulation; the articulation may be expressed with physical vividness by the expression of a face.... Figures are either emphasized or made unimportant by thicker line, as one may shout or whisper to attract attention... Nothing can be abstracted; the parts are meaningless... The unreality of the detail gives connectedness to the whole, which is held together by the artist's compassion.⁶³

Finkelstein also located artistic communication—representation—within the individual artist's aesthetic, formal approach. His analysis was more wedded to the object than Porter's; he takes us along as he untangles compositions. These two artist-critics arrived at a definition of representation that surpasses that of an artwork depicting recognizable objects. Representation, they said, comes from the artist's interior life and its formal manifestation as much as from external objectivity.

Perspectives on Art History: Leland Bell and Robert De Niro

The figurative painters avidly discussed and debated art history and painters of the past. Leland Bell and Robert De Niro stand out as having a particular interest in and aptitude for this conversation. In Chapter 2, I referred to Matthiasdottir's characterization of her husband, Bell, as a "hero-worshipper." He spoke ceaselessly of the particular artists he admired. As a teacher, as well, his primary role was communicating an infectious enthusiasm for art and artists of the past, leading his students on museum trips in which he highlighted a trajectory ranging from Coptic Art to Giacometti. His lectures revolved around a dynamic discussion of compositional arrangement and the rhythms of form and color.

⁶³ Fairfield Porter, "Realism Transcends System," *The Nation*, 23 April 1960.

De Niro, on the other hand, wrote more poetic, ruminative texts on artists, several of which were published in the 1980s in *Art/World*, a magazine published by Bruce Hooten. While Bell conducted a very concrete, formal type of analysis, De Niro focused on characterizing the expressive effects and psychological qualities of artists and their work. Recently, Resika referred to an ongoing debate that Bell and De Niro engaged in during their careers, and even “after death.” At Bell’s memorial service in 1991, De Niro made a speech and revived the dispute which centered on Giacometti, whose art Bell admired and emulated. De Niro, Resika said, thought “it didn’t have to be so hard.”⁶⁴ According to De Niro, Giacometti’s quest turned painting into an unnecessarily difficult process.

In fact, we can see the seeds of this debate when we examine De Niro’s and Bell’s writings in tandem. Bell’s article, “The Case for Derain as an Immortal,” published in *Art News* in 1960, centered around his admiration of Derain’s “wholeness”- his pursuit of “absolute reality.”⁶⁵ Bell compared Derain to artists who pursue novelty, or adhere to an extreme program, considering Derain, in contrast, an artist who painted with his whole self, and achieved a harmony of all elements, a perfect balance that was not reliant on synthetic devices.

De Niro’s writings, on the other hand, espoused understatement as a central ideal in painting. In his piece, “Corot, Verlaine, and Greta Garbo or the Melancholy Syndrome,” De Niro wrote about the restraint found in the work of the painter, the poet, and the actress.⁶⁶ “These three great artists of the North expressed the opulence of

⁶⁴ Paul Resika, in conversation with the author, June 2009.

⁶⁵ Leland Bell, “The Case for Derain as an Immortal,” *Art News* 59 (May 1960): 24-27, 61-63.

⁶⁶ Robert De Niro, “Corot, Verlaine and Greta Garbo or the Melancholy Syndrome,” *Tracks, A Journal of Artistic Writings* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1975): 48-49.

restraint, showing us a sun, not tarnished but shining with a glow borrowed from the moon and neighbor to it.” Highlighting the “haunting sensitivity and disarming simplicity” and “concise evocations” of Verlaine’s poetry, he contrasted it to the “dark, sturdy emphases of Baudelaire’s near sculptural form or the colorful dramatic visualness of Rimbaud.” Of Garbo, De Niro admired “her way of non-confrontation” and her “muted vigor.” And in Corot he referred to “a carnival of understatements.” De Niro linked the understatement of their work to a survival instinct: “Verlaine was a ruin. We are all ruins of some kind, at some time, but some are more ruins than others. Greta Garbo is a half ruin, but Corot somehow managed to rise above his storms.” De Niro referred to the “Melancholy Syndrome,” creating a visual analogy encompassing the three: “One never saw them on holiday sprawling on a beach shaded with a parasol – but the spray from a cold wave breaking against a pier would sometimes awaken them to the chill of a dim October day.” One recognizes De Niro’s own work and process in these comments. Although De Niro has often been compared to Matisse, his painting, particularly the early work, is dark and not ebullient, despite the painterly arabesque. De Niro tried to do more with less, whereas we could say Bell, in his painting, did more with more. Bell’s intense concern with fixing form, establishing relations, and creating dynamic overall rhythms led to a laborious, intensive process, and tight, very complete-feeling canvases. De Niro, however evokes a space, a scene, and a mood with reductive means.

For similar reasons, De Niro also admired Bonnard. In an essay entitled “The Quiet Heart of Bonnard’s Art: Nonflamboyant Joy, Dedication,” De Niro tried to come to

terms with the power and resonance of Bonnard's painting, despite the "slackness of Bonnard's composition."⁶⁷

Bonnard's paintings are in a way more mysterious than those of Matisse... Nothing is sumptuous or majestic. The objects are too busy enjoying their own selves to impose themselves on the spectator as does, say, Rembrandt's Aristotle or in a different way, some of Ingres' elegant and aristocratic sitters. The mystery evoked by Bonnard's canvases is more the mystery of the human psyche as confined to its expression in a particular setting – that of the 1920s or thereabouts – rather than a larger one that because of its universality is harder to situate.⁶⁸

De Niro again located power in a certain understatement, or a withholding of force. De Niro was also taken with a painterly withholding or tentativeness that can be found in certain of Bonnard's works. He wrote:

In a work such as *Large Yellow Nude*, we find what looks like a tentative outlay of forms and colors, later to be embellished, as areas in some of his paintings seem to be. He then decided, apparently, that he had hit on something, and would take no risk of destroying it in an attempt to create something better, of more substance. One finds this same attitude expressed in certain Picassos. This device of spontaneity, almost for its own sake, is hardly seen in painting prior to Cézanne, and in the latter's late paintings, some of which have this same charm of the unresolved, one feels that Cézanne would gladly have sacrificed these pleasant discoveries for something deeper and had every intention of later doing so.⁶⁹

De Niro here was referring to the artistic process, and the capacity for the painter to let go at a point prior to the painting's full completion. This obviously would have interested De Niro a great deal, in that his paintings often exemplified what was viewed as a lack of traditional "finish." The capacity to stop at this point ran counter to many painters working in a more existentialist tradition like Giacometti (and his admirers like Matter and Bell). We see spontaneity and a tentative outlay of forms only in the rare painting

⁶⁷ Robert De Niro, "The Quiet Heart of Bonnard's Art: Nonflamboyant Joy, Dedication," *Art/World* 6, no. 3 (November 20-December 18, 1981): 1, 8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

that Bell left unfinished at the time of his death, like *Figure Group with Bird*, 1991 (fig. 2.8). De Niro found power and drama in Bonnard – he rejected the myth of Bonnard as humble and self-effacing. Using a similar metaphor to the one in the previous essay (the “three artists of the north” showing a sun glowing with moonlight) – De Niro stated of Bonnard’s work: “The luminosity is in the earliest paintings in the show, perhaps somewhat obscured, but ready to burst forth like the sun when the mist has cleared, as well as in the later ones where form is created and enveloped by color.” De Niro continued, “Bonnard may not be sonorous, but he is hardly fragile (although his subjects, from his favorite basset hound to his houses and women, may sometimes seem less than robust) and though his drama is restrained and not tempestuous, it is still evident.”⁷⁰

De Niro did not find understatement and spontaneity only in an artist like Bonnard, he found it also in more unexpected places. In revisiting Soutine on the occasion of a show he reviewed at Galleri Bellman, De Niro wrote:

My principle impression... was less of anguish... than of a subdued and muted sensibility, revealed in the jewel-like and caressed details that the often violent contortions of the forms seem at first to obscure... I thought of him [in the past] in a more cliché way, as a contemporary, more tortured Rembrandt, having more affinities with Van Gogh than with other so-called modern painters. But that side of Soutine, which certainly exists, seems now for me, to have somewhat faded. His distortions... don't seem quite the heart of the matter and are nearly a façade for the exquisite touch revealing his love for all the objects he painted with the lavish caress that Ingres gave to the jewelry of his aristocratic sitters. The influence of Soutine on other painters has often been, and this is probably true of the influence of all the great painters on their followers, a lifting of surface, leaving the heart of the work untouched. Soutine's style is made into a mannerism, emptied of all the delight it encompassed and the result is given a label, Expressionism, putting out of focus the fact that all art is form, and expression.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Robert De Niro, “Robert De Niro on Soutine,” *Art/World* 8, no. 4 (January 1984): 1, 5, 7.

De Niro was making a case for the idea that it is not through detail or finish that meaning is expressed—neither is it through distortion and radical paint handling—but through an open-ness, an identification with the subject, and a penetration and passion that is allowed to remain in “an almost primary state... but at the same time [is] paradoxically raised to a level of refinement rarely seen in any work of art.”⁷²

De Niro wrote that Soutine’s “true originality lay in his penetration to the core of underlying principles of color, composition, and drawing and their application to the expression of his love of the world around him.”⁷³ We can almost imagine Bell writing the first half of this sentence, but his language would probably diverge in the latter. De Niro’s project centered on a certain passionate empathy with the world (I wrote about De Niro and empathy in relation to Hofmann’s theory in Chapter 1.) This value comes across in his writing on Soutine.⁷⁴ Bell’s project was more concretely focused in composition and though he acknowledged the role of varying subject matter on the artist’s approach, he rejected the same type of intense attachment and involvement with the subject. In fact, while De Niro emphasized the subjective element, Bell suggested that there is a universal element to representational painting: that the ultimate achievement is a deep, total penetration of reality that transcends the individual.

Bell considered the most admirable issue in Derain’s painting that he gave relevance to each element; the painting became a perfected sum total. Together, the

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Louis Finkelstein also lectured on Soutine, and used the word “empathy” to describe Soutine’s approach to nature. Discussing Soutine’s painting, *Landscape of Céret*, Finkelstein wrote, “There is a kind of empathy for the whole surface of that hill.” However, Finkelstein’s and De Niro’s writing on Soutine are very different. Finkelstein’s analysis of Soutine was focused on presenting the “logic” of Soutine’s approach to space – how Soutine expressed volume by using what Finkelstein terms the “Geodesic Principle” as opposed to traditional perspective. See Finkelstein, *The Unpicturelikeness of Pollock, Soutine and Others*, 89-115.

elements convey a sense of reality. Bell's idea of the subject was differentiated from a narrative; rather he espoused in representational painting what we could call an essential object-ness. The artist must communicate and declare the feeling we most identify with that part of nature. For example, Bell wrote:

Derain's 1939 *Still-life with Fish and Frying Pan* is a still-life which exists in freedom. Its dark night space contains the woodness of a table, the limpness of a cloth, the suppleness of fish. Flesh, wood, iron, cloth, earthenware are contrasting densities which sign together. There is a hierarchy of curves; fluid, smooth, abrupt, sharp, drooping, limp. Derain's is the mysterious search for the subtlety and diversity of curves which would express the resilience of fish in contrast to the hang in the folds of cloth; or those other curves which rim the kitchen utensils or form the delicate envelope of the kidneys. He explores their degrees of difference and similarity as a range, a progression and a circulation. Derain senses the virtue of these objects; they remain intact. He paints them as clear entities. He preserves the integrity of their appearance, of the "skin" that represents their interior being.⁷⁵

How to achieve this intense reality, this "thing-ness"? Bell admired Derain for allowing his paintings, and nature, to speak purely, without the ego of the artist or novelty getting in the way. In this article, and in other lectures, Bell quoted the following statement by Derain. Derain wrote, "Nothing really belongs to us, neither our emotions nor our sensations nor any of the gifts which are furnished us by nature. Why pride ourselves on our so-called originality?" Derain then quoted the saying of a Chinese philosopher: "I do not innovate, I transmit," with the comment, "there was a wise man." These statements had a great deal of meaning for Bell, who held a fairly unique view of representational painting – that some universality was possible. Where Finkelstein wrote about the individual choices of each artist, Bell suggested that "the real" is something that could be universally accepted and agreed upon. He considered Derain's timelessness admirable for this reason. Bell wrote:

⁷⁵ Bell, "The Case for Derain as an Immortal."

[Derain's] art continually escapes the orthodoxy of modern painting and yet he is fully contemporary. Like one of his Pierrots – arrested with his hands on the strings of his instrument, Derain was suspended in time, standing alone, letting it flow around him and meditating on the mystery of reality... Rouault wrote of him in 1931: "He is an artist of perfect detachment and with a care for pictorial justice that is far from theories of anti-modernism or modernism." Which brings to mind Apollinaire's praise in 1916 of Derain's "complete disinterestedness."⁷⁶

Bell was referring to universality when, in comparing Derain to Poussin, he wrote:

...both Poussin and Derain paint a total landscape. Poussin's is a total landscape claimed for the gods. For Derain it is not a question of remaking Poussin from nature, but of claiming the total landscape for total man... A landscape to which every element – whether road, or cloud, hill, or house – has an inherent relationship which it would be a cataclysm to falsify.⁷⁷

In one sense, Bell's idea of the artist who does not concern himself with novelty was similar to De Niro's idea of "restraint." Bell lauded Derain's lack of concern with virtuosity for its own sake, and wrote about the painter's "humility." However, Bell contrasted virtuosity with what he saw as Derain's actual goal: "to penetrate the mystery of absolute reality." Bell quoted Chardin, who said "The eye must be taught to look at nature; and how many have never and will never see her! This is the anguish of the artist's life," and wrote that "In this sense Derain was the painter of doubt, of anguish."⁷⁸ Here the two artists—De Niro and Bell—diverged. De Niro did not ascribe to the idea of an "absolute" or universal representation, and did not consider doubt and anguish crucial.

Bell believed that the artist arrived at absolute reality through the play of each part. He wrote:

The atmosphere of luminosity in [Derain's painting] *The Model*, 1919, is certainly not arrived at through a mere copying of an effect. It is not an effect and it can't be copied. The luminosity is created by the play of

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

proportions between colors, tones, weights and all the ebb and flow of those exchanges which allow each element, on the instant, to assume its just role. The luminosity is the perfected balance of the structure's parts.⁷⁹

Bell considered this process the “orchestration” of parts: the artist had a two-part challenge: to allow each element its own place and integrity, and to simultaneously create relationships among the parts so that the whole painting gained a circular movement and completeness. Although Bell's emphasis on the rhythms of the whole painting is generally understood by those who have written about his work, this idea of the artist's dual role is more ignored. Bell wrote about this two-part mission in describing Derain's 1930 St. Maximin landscapes:

I can relate the dark tree elements of the foreground to the light tower elements in the distant monastery. Their verticality is an apparent two-dimensional relationship, but each stays in its zone and keeps to its proper function, a tree near, a tower far. Every rock and shrub throughout, all the elements keep their distance, they are in their true place and yet they are part of an intense circulation. They are not fixed, predetermined. There is no trace of rigidity. By assuming their proper role they are liberated.⁸⁰

Sometimes it was a less obvious type of “orchestration” that allowed individual volumes to simultaneously retain their integrity and be part of the whole. Bell wrote of Derain's *Nude with Cat*, 1936-38, that “the clear and continuous contours reveal the compact volumes of the figure, giving birth to a deepened space. He arrives at a light which, streaming as a mysterious translucence from within the nude's forms, gives each volume its ultimate realization. These volumes transcend the sense of weightiness.”⁸¹ In other words, in this painting, an orchestration of forms was achieved by using line, volume and light simultaneously to balance and counter one another.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Bell's article on Derain was intensely analytical – a detailed investigation in which he attempts to convince the reader of the painter's unique achievement. His purpose, and his language, differed from De Niro's ruminative prose that rather obliquely touched on a couple of issues that he found compelling in a painter. Thus, even their writing and general aesthetic philosophy echoed their differences as painters: where De Niro was the gestural, bravura painter who found meaning in the direct attack and empathetic response to the subject; Bell was compelled to penetrate nature by achieving an ultimate realization of forms and their integration.

Conclusion

The investigation of the artists' own theory provides yet another, essential lens into their work, their careers, their place in the art world, and art historical/aesthetic issues. This dissertation began with another artist's voice – that of Hans Hofmann, who taught several of these painters and made a life-long impression on them. In the second chapter we witnessed their shift from abstraction to figuration, catalyzed in some instances by the theory of other artists and mentors. Chapter 3 took a step back, showing how the institutions and critics perceived their work. Through all of these forces and experiences, the artists developed their own voices. Their own theory has been largely unexplored in the art historical literature. In this chapter, the pairing and comparing of two artists' writing on a theme has provided additional insights into each painter, as well as helping to see them in the context of the larger art world and the commonalities and differences among artists of this generation.

Ultimately, these artists were asking, through their writing and lectures, what painting was, and what it meant to be an artist. For Matter and Beck it was a process of finding their voice through the act of mark-making. Finkelstein defined representational painting as achieving a simultaneous vision impossible with any other medium, and Porter viewed the artist as a unique individual who was responsible for creating meaning and art out of formal means. For Bell, there was something universal about the process of making painting and being an artist, and for De Niro the artist must express an empathetic, personal response to nature. In the chapter to follow, I will look at the artists in terms of their careers. Against this backdrop of personal belief systems and individual definitions of painting, I will address the arcs of their careers, and how they survived, persisted, and faced the challenges of the art world.

CHAPTER FIVE: CAREER ARCS

The careers of each of the figurative painters discussed here developed along unique paths: some starting with great promise, and then meeting serious challenge; others beginning almost silently, and gradually expanding. Here I will look at four careers, that of Robert De Niro, Nell Blaine, Louisa Matthiasdottir, and Paul Resika, each of which traces a distinct arc. Despite being increasingly out of the mainstream, certain New York dealers believed in this work and showed it consistently – Elinor Poindexter exhibited Blaine and De Niro; Louis Pollack of the Peridot Gallery showed Resika and Rosemarie Beck; Robert and Jane Schoelkopf of the Schoelkopf Gallery worked with Matthiasdottir and Leland Bell; Virginia Zabriskie represented De Niro and mounted exhibitions with Bell, Blaine and Georges. The history of these independently-minded dealers is another primarily untold story, and I will provide some background on their galleries, and their aesthetics, as it applies to their relationship with these painters.¹

Parallels can be found between the commercial career paths of the painters, and the stylistic development of their work. Therefore, for each painter, I will examine the development of the work and the career arc in tandem, discussing relationships between their personality, world-view, aesthetic, and career choices.

¹ The history of the Poindexter Gallery is discussed to a certain extent, within the context of the Poindexter art collections, donated to the Montana Historical Society and the Yellowstone Art Museum, in Rick Newby and Andrea Pappas, *The Most Difficult Journey: the Poindexter Collections of American Modernist painting* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002). The history of the Zabriskie Gallery is discussed in *Zabriskie: Fifty Years* (New York: Ruder Finn Press, 2004). Similar histories have not yet been written on the Schoelkopf Gallery or the Peridot Gallery.

The Alliance of Figurative Artists, which was founded in 1969 and held meetings each Friday evening for over fifteen years, is part of this narrative. It became a community for artists whose careers had become marginalized, and was a forum for advanced theory, allowing the painters to develop followings among younger artists. However, it was characterized by raucous and bitter debates – both a result and perhaps a cause of their further marginalization.

Career of Robert De Niro

The career of Robert De Niro was marked by an interesting paradox: a tremendous consistency in terms of aesthetics and stylistic development, but a dramatic arc and intense situations in terms of his public life with galleries and dealers. However, a parallel can be made as well: the discernment which characterized De Niro's choice of motif was matched by his approach to social situations and the art world. De Niro had little use for the niceties of the art world, or an expansive network of peers and supporters. He chose these relationships carefully; he offended loyal champions; he struggled to make ends meet, and suffered psychological challenges. As Thomas Hess suggested in a 1975 article, his disdain and elitist attitude (which Hess considers expressed itself aesthetically) may have cost him a successful career.²

As I have briefly discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, De Niro's public life as an artist began very strongly. He was poised to assume a certain position in the New York art world, but both the direction of the art world and his own intense personality and psychology intervened. De Niro was, for most of his life, intensely poor and desperate

² Thomas Hess, "Warhol and De Niro: Modesty is the Best Policy," *New York Magazine*, 6 December 1976, 97-98.

for money. Some of the other artists in this chapter were more able to cope financially, either because they had outside financial support from family, or because they supplemented the sales of work with income from teaching jobs. For De Niro, these jobs were sporadic and irregular, and, in addition, he had married another painter from the Hofmann school, Virginia Admiral, and they had a young child to support in the 1940s and 50s.

De Niro was not polite about his fellow artists, dismissing much of the work being made by contemporaries. He did not socialize at the Club, the Cedar Bar, or Waldorf cafeteria, and apparently he did not always show up at his own openings.³ The writer and poet Barbara Guest, who knew De Niro in the 1950s, painted a telling portrait of him when she wrote:

He had a few friends, but mostly was alone in the tremendously cluttered place in which he painted. Sometimes I saw him out walking, and a scene plays across the screen of my mind of the day I saw him, standing on the sidewalk talking to a woman friend while he held his mongrel dog on a leash. It was a typical encounter, a repeated scene of his life. There was no social life of dinners, etc. There were many parties he did not attend, or at which he showed up as if walking his dog. Yet how many artists in America read Verlaine, Mallarme, Racine, and also the New York Poets? He loved French painting and modernism, yet it was Matisse whom he studied. Erratic, gloomy, untidy in his studio-home, his mind was elegant.... He was given to acid comments about the art scene, with which I might add, he was thoroughly familiar. He preferred provocative conversations, and exchange of ideas about art with selective people... In that way, when I knew him, he was not a true recluse. His eye was alert to social and artistic currents, and he listened.... as with many sophisticated people, there was a suspicious element within him, and in his outlook. It is in his painting that we encounter the person he wished to represent him.⁴

³ This statement is based on the recollections of Virginia Admiral and friends of De Niro, in Martica Sawin, *Robert De Niro, His Art and Life*, 1994, 52. Typescript of unpublished monograph, copy in author's files, courtesy of Sawin.

⁴ Barbara Guest, "Robert De Niro in the 1950s and 60s," *Robert De Niro Sr. Exh. cat.* (San Francisco, CA: Hackett-Freedman Gallery, 1998).

Around 1949, Charles Egan invited De Niro – via a note placed under his door – to show with him.⁵ Egan, who had opened his gallery in 1946, is known for introducing the American public to Willem de Kooning; he held the painter’s first exhibition in 1948. De Niro would have three exhibitions with Egan, in 1951, 1953, and 1955, which were reviewed enthusiastically by Thomas Hess, Henry McBride, and Frank O’Hara, respectively. In these early shows, De Niro set the tone for the entire *oeuvre* that would follow, both in terms of style and subject matter. I have already discussed this in terms of the painting *Moroccan Women* that was exhibited in 1951 – a motif that would remain compelling to De Niro for decades. The work included in these first three shows also established the selective group of subjects that De Niro chose to work with throughout his career. This included still lifes with plaster casts, instruments, and flowers; figure and figure group paintings - mostly Moroccan women à la Delacroix and Matisse, or similar nudes and bathers; strong-tragic female performers of both recent and older history like Lola Montez and Greta Garbo; and biblical themes after Renaissance masters he admired – most especially the Crucifixion, but also the Descent from the Cross and the Entombment. Later he would also make landscape an important part of his production. De Niro’s subject matter and treatment mirrored his view of the world and his lifestyle – his increasingly minimal still lifes, his melancholic portraits of performers, and the crucifixions reflect a contemplative and solitary life.

The crucifixion subject, which was first presented in De Niro’s 1955 Egan exhibition, was both a compelling and challenging motif for the artist. De Niro was raised in an Irish-Italian family, but emphatically denied any religious meaning associated with his choice of the subject. In this he reminds us of other artists treated

⁵ Sawin, *Robert De Niro, His Art and Life*, 37.

here, like Bell, who claimed subject matter was merely a formal structure. Martica Sawin mentioned one of the crucifixions in a review in the 1950s, and when she met De Niro shortly thereafter, he wanted her to know that he had received several letters suggesting he was a “religious painter.” He explained to her that he was not motivated by belief, although he could not deny the inherent pathos of the motif. But he emphasized that he was drawn to the compositional possibilities provided by the cross and the way it distributed and divided figures.⁶ De Niro’s and Bell’s similar insistence on the primacy of form functioned partly as a strategy for positioning their work; it allowed them to link it to abstraction. But the fact that De Niro’s motifs were chosen so discriminately, and held long term interest for him, certainly suggests that iconography was indeed significant. De Niro admitted the “pathos” in the motif, and certainly as a “romantic” artist who tended towards melancholy, the crucifixion was an opportunity to examine the human emotions of torment and suffering. In the first chapter I had discussed De Niro’s connection to Hofmann in terms of a shared interest in the issue of “empathy,” which can be defined as the artist’s psychic and spiritual response to the subject. The crucifixion was a subject that provoked a deep, intense response in De Niro and compelled him as a painter.

An important early sale in De Niro’s career was that of his first large crucifixion. The painting was acquired by the Museum Purchase Fund, set up by Gloria Vanderbilt to help distribute the work of younger artists to museums and other institutions. Meyer Schapiro was one of the jurors and a supporter of De Niro. The crucifixions were also the subject of a 1958 *Art News* profile, “De Niro Works on a Series of Pictures,” authored

⁶ Ibid., 49.

by Eleanor Munro with photographs by Rudolph Burckhardt.⁷ This *Art News* series usually profiled an artist's process of completing a single work, but De Niro's way of working made this impossible. A crucifixion painting was photographed at various stages and reproduced in the article, but it was reported that De Niro eventually destroyed this work. Instead, Munro analyzed a whole series of crucifixions, reporting that De Niro was satisfied with only one gouache. De Niro used a group of pieces as a process of exploring compositional possibilities and refining. A single subject engendered a multitude of sketches, paintings on paper, and canvases. Munro reported, "Book after book of these quick studies pile up. Most end in the wastebasket. Perhaps ten out of a hundred, De Niro keeps for exhibition and his own use."⁸ He also made radical changes and refinements within a single sheet or canvas. Munro wrote:

His process of working is akin to the Chinese way, or to Matisse's: That is, step by step he reduces and simplifies, not only the image, but his brushwork, the surface and the interior spaces of the canvas. . . . He swiftly draws his main image with charcoal on a stretched, pre-primed canvas, filling the space. Next he lays on large, flat areas of color. Then, returning to the canvas again and again over a period of weeks, De Niro will simplify, cover large areas with flat strokes of the palette-knife, scrape huge sections bare with a turpentine-soaked rag, and draw broad, outlined forms with one of his Rubens brushes. He paints rather like a furniture mover: shifting whole objects to the right or left, pushing a big form completely offstage, covering up a welter of detail by a cloth of pale, greyed color.⁹

Even in his drawings, De Niro moved and eliminated forms. The "underdrawing" became an important part of the work – creating an active gray ground on which the darker lines dance and rest.

⁷ Eleanor Munro, "De Niro Works on a Series of Pictures," *Art News* 57 (May 1958): 38-41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

In her profile, Munro wrote that “Versus ‘clubs,’ Isms and formulas, De Niro, who says he has several times turned his life upside down, now wants ‘peace and quiet’ for his painting and himself.” De Niro’s selective or elitist social nature was paralleled in his aesthetic process. His choice of motifs was specific and discerning, and he edited his work intensely, paring down compositions to the essentials, working over compositions until they were right, and discarding paintings or drawings that did not resolve. This process worked well for him aesthetically, but his public and professional life became problematic.

De Niro spoke to Munro about his struggles with the crucifixion subject. He described returning to the subject after a break and it being “the worst ever... nothing new ... repeating an empty thing,” and he describes a 1955 crucifixion as “just too primitive in the worst sense.”) Despite these challenges, De Niro would persist with the subject throughout his career. He had at first worked without direct source material for the crucifixions (unlike most of his other subjects), but later, he turned to specific art historical referents. Mantegna’s *Crucifixion* from the Louvre was the inspiration for De Niro’s 1962 *Crucifixion after Mantegna* (fig. 5.1), which was purchased by a collector from the 1963 Knoedler “Five American Painters” exhibition, and eventually placed in the collection of the Catholic center at New York University, where it remains. Around the same time, he painted a *Crucifixion after El Greco*, which was purchased by the Hirshhorn Museum. A later painting, the *Crucifixion*, 1985 (fig. 5.2), utilizes the three cross image also found in the 1962 *Crucifixion after Mantegna*. However, if we compare these two works, we see something of De Niro’s subtle, but distinct stylistic development. In the 1960s painting, De Niro made the most out of a dark, grayish

ground—likely the result of underpainting—above which he rests rich washes of color in black outlined silhouettes of figures. The 1980s painting, however, is made up of dense, brushy areas of color that sit right on the surface, as opposed to receding into a dark ground like the earlier painting.

The Egan Gallery was gradually taken over by Elinor Poindexter, who had stepped in to help Charlie Egan in 1953, both financially and professionally. Egan was a heavy drinker who had trouble maintaining the business end of matters.¹⁰ Elinor's husband, George, was a New York investment banker originally from Montana, who had recently become involved in the contemporary art scene as a collector. He had enrolled in a painting class with Jack Tworkov and began to buy paintings by Robert Goodnough, Franz Kline, de Kooning, and Resnick. Elinor had had some previous experience in the art world: in the 1930s she worked as an assistant to Carl Zigrosser, the director of the Weyhe Gallery. Subsequently she had married and left the city to raise three children in suburban Connecticut. Her work with Egan marked a re-entry into the professional art world.¹¹

In 1955, the Egan gallery was forced to close, but Elinor opened in his space, since she was already paying the rent, and then moved to 21 West 56th Street. Poindexter developed, over the years, a roster of artists that included De Niro and Blaine, as well as Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Richard Diebenkorn, Milton Resnick, Michael

¹⁰ Descriptions of Charles Egan, and this issue, can be found in Lee Hall, *Elaine and Bill, Portrait of a Marriage: The Lives of Willem and Elaine de Kooning* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993) and Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *De Kooning: An American Master* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2004).

¹¹ Rick Newby, "Missionaries for Modernism: George and Elinor Poindexter and Montana's Poindexter Collections of Postwar American Painting," in Newby and Pappas, *The Most Difficult Journey: The Poindexter Collections of American Modernist Painting*.

Goldberg, Jules Olitski, and Al Held. This list of artists is yet another example of the fluidity between abstraction and representation that existed in this period.¹²

The Poindexters gave De Niro a monthly stipend in exchange for paintings, and would remain loyal supporters, amassing a significant collection of his work over the years. Parker Tyler, in a review of De Niro's 1956 Poindexter exhibition, discussed Moroccan-themed pictures, portraits of Greta Garbo as Anna Christie, and portraits of Verlaine.¹³ Tyler mentioned the darker palette that De Niro was still employing in this period, and the "washy" drawing technique achieved by De Niro's rubbing out earlier drawings as he worked, and using the ground for effect.

De Niro would not stay with Poindexter, despite her loyal support. In 1958 he began to work with Virginia Zabriskie, at the recommendation of Meyer Schapiro. De Niro was suspicious and bitter about his dealers and the art world. He had an intense sense of his own self-worth yet never made much money on sales of his work.

Virginia Zabriskie had opened her gallery on Madison Avenue in 1954, when she was in her twenties. She began with a stable of young artists that included Pat Adams and Lester Johnson, and specialized in showing young painters who were often idiosyncratic, did not fit neatly into art historical categories, and bucked the current trends. Over the years, Zabriskie showed many painterly figurative artists in group and solo exhibitions, like Lennart Anderson, Robert Beauchamp, Bob Thompson, Earl Kerkam, Bell, Georges, and Resika, as well as De Niro.¹⁴ Despite the many exhibitions

¹² Rick Newby, in "Missionaries for Modernism," and Andrea Pappas, in "Tradition and Innovation at the Poindexter Gallery," in Newby and Pappas, *The Most Difficult Journey: The Poindexter Collections of American Modernist Painting*, address the wide range of material shown by Elinor Poindexter.

¹³ Parker Tyler, "Robert De Niro," *Art News* 55 (Summer 1956): 53.

¹⁴ An exhibition history is included in *Zabriskie: Fifty Years* (New York: Ruder Finn Press, 2004).

he had with her over twelve years, and fairly regular sales, De Niro was not easy to work with.

It was following his third show at Zabriskie that De Niro was able to travel to Paris, where he had longed to live and follow through on his deep interests in French art and literature. Although he loved the culture, his life became even more difficult there. He never had enough money, and he lived and made his studio along with the painter Bob Thompson in a garage-like building at 93 rue Glacière, with no heat, courtyard bathrooms, and a concrete floor. He was warned by doctors and friends that the damp, unheated conditions would make him ill, which they indeed did.¹⁵

Among Zabriskie's clients was Joseph Hirshhorn, who became an important collector of De Niro's work and a benefactor, acquiring over fifty works over the course of his career. While De Niro was in Paris, Hirshhorn visited and asked the painter to take him around to galleries and introduce him to artists.

De Niro's painting, *Pattern Still Life #1*, 1960 (fig. 5.3), was painted and purchased by Hirshhorn just prior to the artist's Paris trip. It is like a poem in its pointed selection of objects and patterns and the harmonies and synthesis that happen with their interactions. In this sense, it is obviously inspired by Matisse – patterned fabrics echo the flowers in a vase, and these as well as solid panels of green fabric suggest the world outside. The outline of a conch shell is contrasted to the more rounded plaster head and a more angled chair plays off a rounded one. Although De Niro would continue to use the exact same still life objects throughout his career, he gradually further simplified his approach and forged his own style that was less based on a direct response to Matisse. De Niro's 1970 *Still Life with Two Vases* (fig. 5.4) has the more surface-based, less

¹⁵ Sawin, *Robert De Niro, His Art and Life*, 59.

washy paint application that I discussed earlier as characteristic of his later work.

Although space was condensed in the 1960 still life, it is even more simplified here, with a quickly-drawn line standing for the edge of a table and an otherwise overall blue ground beyond the three objects represented – two vases full of flowers and a platter of fruit. This radical simplification was the goal of De Niro's pursuit, as mentioned in Chapter 4 – how to evoke and express feeling with *less*.

Through this period, De Niro continued to work with Zabriskie, mounting shows until 1970 despite their difficult relationship. During his time in France, De Niro complained that he was not receiving the three hundred dollars a month she had promised him, and that she was not responding to his letters or paying him for sales made. Still, De Niro returned to New York in 1964 and Zabriskie held two shows of his work in 1965. In October 1965, De Niro exhibited an early version of his *Women at the Well* paintings, as well as his large *Greta Garbo as Anna Christie* (fig. 5.5), which was reproduced on the invitation, and purchased by Hirshhorn. Reviews of this show, some of which also reproduced the Garbo painting, were quite favorable.¹⁶

Gradually, however, the changed climate of the New York art world caught up with De Niro. Pop Art was in full force, and by 1967-68, when Zabriskie mounted two more exhibitions, sales of his work had plummeted. After 1970, Zabriskie stopped organizing shows and De Niro could not find another dealer. In 1975, when De Niro was included in the *Painterly Representation* exhibition curated by Louis Finkelstein, discussed in Chapter 4, Elinor Poindexter inquired about his New York representation. Finding him without a New York dealer, she invited him to show once more with her.

¹⁶ Ted Berrigan, "Robert De Niro," *Art News* 64 (October 1965): 12; Amy Goldin, "De Niro," *Arts* 40 (November 1965): 62.

This he did, and when Poindexter closed her gallery a couple of years later, she arranged for him to work with Graham Gallery, where he would have five exhibitions through the 1980s.

De Niro's 1976 exhibition at Poindexter was discussed by Thomas Hess in an incisive *New York* magazine article, "Warhol and De Niro: Modesty is the Best Policy." A Warhol exhibition at the Visual Arts Museum was concurrent with De Niro's Poindexter show, and Hess used the two shows to posit the question of why one was successful and had achieved celebrity, while financial and popular success had evaded the other. By this time, De Niro's son, the actor, had achieved fame, so this issue was particularly poignant. Hess arrived at the conclusion that De Niro's goals were so lofty, and his opinion of himself so prideful, that the public was resentful. They reacted to his disdain and contempt by rejecting him. In contrast, the public embraced the "modesty" of Warhol, who used simple, charged symbols and motifs and embraced popular culture. Hess called De Niro an "aristocratic artist," writing,

His passionate works aim for elevated levels of historic discourse. Perhaps that's why he's had so little success. Perhaps the art world resents pride, is made uneasy by grand gestures. Certainly Andy Warhol, who is a very successful artist, is also a very modest one.¹⁷

Hess's assessment feels true and perceptive; De Niro's ego and his disdain for his peers and the establishment tarnished his relationships with dealers and affected his career. Along with his ambition and what Hess called his "aristocratic" tendency, came the desire to paint the subject matter of art history and to work with a select and deliberate group of motifs. As Hess noted, the only "commonplace" or non-art historical motif in his *oeuvre* or this show were the paintings of Greta Garbo as Anna Christie. His other

¹⁷ Hess, "Warhol and De Niro: Modesty is the Best Policy," 98.

subjects – the crucifixion, still life, landscape, the bathers and Moroccan figure groups were rooted firmly in the art of the past. Although this did not seem to be an issue with the critics in the 1950s and 1960s, the choice of subject eventually caught up with him in the sense of being against the tide of socio-politically current art.

In the final decades of De Niro's life and career, his financial situation eased. His ex-wife, Virginia Admiral, helped him in the mid-1970s. She had become involved in purchasing and converting SoHo buildings from manufacturing spaces to artists' lofts. She turned over to De Niro one of these spaces, the top floor in a building on West Broadway, which would remain his home and studio. Later, his son began to support him. De Niro was able to focus on his art and his studio life without anxiety, to hire models and purchase whatever materials he needed. His painting became particularly sumptuous, almost a direct outward expression of this pleasant situation. Nevertheless, during his lifetime, he generally remained, as Hess wrote, "trapped on the dark side of the success machine – the outsider's limbo."¹⁸ Neither did De Niro's relationship with the art world ever mellow significantly. He was pleased by his first exhibition abroad, the only one during his lifetime, at the Crane Kalman Gallery in London in 1986 – a two-person exhibition with Paul Resika. Both Resika and De Niro were showing by this time at the Graham Gallery, which helped to organize the show. Nevertheless, De Niro came to mistrust the Graham Gallery too, and pulled his work from the gallery. De Niro died in 1993, six months after the memorial service for his friend Leland Bell – where he had not missed an opportunity to continue their aesthetic debate, discussed in the previous chapter. De Niro was a romantic and an idealist. His career was characterized—and

¹⁸ Ibid., 98.

affected—by the desire to make work unfettered by practical concerns, and to choose his subjects, and his intellectual and aesthetic conversations discerningly.

Career of Nell Blaine

Blaine's career began with similarly great promise, achieving the attention of Greenberg, Peggy Guggenheim, and Howard Putzel. Her stylistic shifts, particularly in the first part of her career, were much more dramatic than De Niro's. Her work evolved from the geometric abstractions of the mid-1940s to the rough-hewn cubist representational work of 1949-50, to the Héliou and Léger-inspired "machine" figurations of 1950-51. By the mid 1950s Blaine's work became more naturalistic and she developed her distinctive painterly touch. She also began to work extensively with the "symbolic" use of color I discussed in Chapters 1 and 4.

However, after the highpoints of her early career, and even despite the terrible events becoming ill with polio and her resulting handicap, her career settled in and proceeded steadily over many years. Like De Niro, Blaine also showed with Poindexter, but she formed a solid personal and professional relationship with the dealer and exhibited with her for the entire course of the gallery's existence – from 1955 to 1976.

Blaine, in contrast to De Niro, thrived on the social and creative energy of her community of artistic peers. The support and friendship of artists, writers, and her dealer helped her to survive her illness, and to maintain a regular and steady public visibility. Her work and choice of subject matter subtly reflects this attitude. A recurrent motif in her oeuvre is the indoor / outdoor scene, in which a still life or interior is set before a window, looking out towards an expansive view. The motif is a metaphor for her life –

the inner world of the studio thriving on and requiring the energies of the larger art world and community. Although Blaine was social, she was also determined to have complete privacy and independence when she worked (a situation more difficult to maintain after her illness).

Blaine's work was exhibited at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery. Her painting, *Blue Pieces*, an Arp-influenced abstraction, was included in *The Women*, Guggenheim's second exhibition of women artists, in 1945. It was a time of great energy and promise – Blaine was also involved with the American Abstract Artists group and the Jane Street Gallery. Guggenheim held an exhibition of Hofmann's work and Blaine purchased a drawing for ninety dollars. Blaine's attitude about the social scene and her enjoyment of it is clear in a 1984 statement she made about the gallery:

There was a lot going on in that gallery... really three different things or directions. Paintings were everywhere! She hung minor Cubists out by the elevator! My student friends felt fee to come. Today I have young students and I often don't know what to say to them. I think that if you only do your work and not go around and be in the 'right place' that you'll never make it. But once you know the pleasures of painting then you are hooked on it.... Peggy was bizarre but she took a chance on young painters. At that time, no one could see that the Pollock paintings were going to be taken so seriously. But what was important about the gallery was there was always Peggy's presence. I think that Art of This Century was the liveliest gallery around at that time – and perhaps any time.¹⁹

Blaine's embrace of the scene and the community expressed itself in her involvement and leadership of the Jane Street Gallery, and following that, her place in the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, where solo exhibitions of her work were held in 1953 and 1954. The Tibor de Nagy Gallery became an extension of the poets and painters circles in which Blaine had already found herself – John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch,

¹⁹ Nell Blaine, typescript draft of statement on Peggy Guggenheim and her Art of this Century Gallery, July 1984, prepared for Virginia Dortch, ed., *Peggy Guggenheim and her Friends* (Milan: Berenice Art Books, Archives, Estate of Nell Blaine. (Differs from published version of statement.)

and Jane Freilicher, Larry Rivers, Grace Hartigan, and Fairfield Porter. In these years Blaine collaborated on Kenneth Koch's first book and designed sets for Ashbery's *The Heroes*. Blaine's position, in terms of this community, was again promising in terms of the pulse of the art world. In 1982, Blaine recalled this scene:

Fairfield [Porter] and Grace Hartigan (then George), figured prominently in the gallery roster. There were direct links, now well known, between East Hampton, Southampton and the "New York School," springing up strongly at this time. Energies ran high, both creatively and socially. There were so many parties and gallery openings and poetry readings that we all saw each other frequently. Evenings were long with parties after parties and there were talks in bars and studios... and many intimacies.²⁰

Her first show at Poindexter included the painting *Merry-Go-Round*, 1955 (fig. 5.6), which blended some of the stylistic approaches she had experimented with in the previous years. It included a Cubist, abstracted treatment of the figure, an all-over paint surface, a non-local use of color, and an unusual palette of flesh-tones, pale blues and greens, brown and gray. Although the painting is forceful and energetic, the approach still seems experimental and something of a composite. Two years later, Blaine would use a somewhat similar palette, but refine her brushstroke and organize the composition around a more naturalistic treatment in her painting *Autumn Studio I*, 1957 (fig. 1.13). Here Blaine forged her own voice. By 1958, Blaine's hand became even more assured as she made paintings like *Harbor and Green Cloth II* (fig. 3.15), the painting which was the focus of Lawrence Campbell's *Art News* profile, and which was purchased by the Whitney Museum the same year it was made.²¹

In 1959, Blaine set off for her trip abroad, using the money she had made from sales at her 1958 Poindexter exhibition. She went to Greece, first Delphi, and then

²⁰ Nell Blaine, "Remembering Fairfield." Unpublished typescript, March 1982. Archives, Estate of Nell Blaine, New York.

²¹ Lawrence Campbell, "Blaine Paints a Picture," *Art News* 58 (May 1959): 38-41, 61-62.

Mykonos, having learned of affordable government studios there. Her work continued to progress in the same vein as it had in New York; she made *Interior at Stupa*, 1959 (fig. 5.7), which is similar to *Harbor and Green Cloth II* in its indoor/outdoor motif, and its painterly approach. The *Art News* profile, which was published in 1959, attracted visitors to her Mykonos studio, and Blaine recalled, “I had really never had it so good. Suddenly I had a great success there.”²² However, this period was dramatically interrupted by Blaine’s illness. She was diagnosed with bulbar-spinal polio, and flown to Athens, to Wiesbaden, Germany, and eventually back to New York in an iron lung for treatment. Immediately the positive and supportive community that Blaine had established became evident. A benefit exhibition was held at Poindexter Gallery, organized by Hess and Leslie Katz, with contributions from de Kooning and Rauschenberg. In response to extreme adversity, Blaine acted with intense determination, calling on both her own inner resources and those of her friends. Like De Niro, she had no family to support her financially, but she managed to support herself, even through her illness, with the sale of paintings and the occasional awards and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Blaine distinguished between her pre- and post-polio paintings by characterizing the former as having “the feeling of over-expenditure of energy.”²³ This quality is particularly evident in paintings such as those mentioned above, *Harbor and Green Cloth II* and *Interior at Stupa*. The strokes of paint seem to contain all the bravado, the dynamism and force, that we associate with abstraction, but which Blaine applies to her indoor/outdoor scenes. Her new physical reality challenged this type of painterly attack.

²² Nell Blaine, in conversation with Martica Sawin, in Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 60.

²³ *Ibid.*, 70.

However, Blaine qualifies her remark, declaring, “What I did afterward represents me myself, free and detached.”

In a wheelchair, Blaine was forced to work on smaller-size canvases, and she worked closer to her paintings. “The worst limitation is working so close,” she stated. “I used to be very athletic while painting; I would run back and run forward so I wouldn’t lose the knowledge of where that stroke should go.”²⁴ Although Blaine still worked with hatched strokes, her paintings after polio were less “staccato” than those made just prior. They include solid areas of color, with more deliberate mark-making. The difference in the painterly approach is clear when comparing her 1968 painting *Interior at Quaker Hill II* (fig. 1.14) to *Harbor and Green Cloth II*, made a decade prior. *Interior at Quaker Hill* is an echo of the earlier painting in terms of subject—table and chair set before a bay window—but forms are more boldly delineated and solid, perspective is more articulated, and it incorporates a greater range of mark-making. Perhaps this is what Blaine meant when she spoke of her post-polio paintings as more personal, free, and detached. The earlier painting was made in the language of Abstract Expressionism with its focus on flatness, gesture, and the all-over paint surface. Blaine’s physical limitations freed her to approach painting differently.

Despite the gradually increasing marginalization that Blaine and the other painterly figurative artists faced, her relationship with Ellie Poindexter was solid, and this relationship sustained her career. Poindexter owned property in Saint Lucia in the British West Indies, and actually modified a house there, to make it accessible for Blaine’s use. Blaine spent almost a year there in 1965 with Dilys Evans, a nurse who had taken care of

²⁴ Ibid., 70.

Blaine in the hospital in New York, who became her companion, caretaker, and painting student.

Later in her life, Blaine reflected on the importance of not just sustained work, but also maintaining a place in the community and social life, “The only way to survive is to keep working and being involved and to have young people as well as contemporaries around... Never retire is my motto.”²⁵ Indeed, the last decades of Blaine’s life and career were filled with activity, work, and activity. After Poindexter closed her gallery in 1976, Blaine exhibited with the Fischbach Gallery in New York. She purchased her home in Gloucester, Massachusetts in 1974, and for the rest of her life, would spend summers in Gloucester, and winters in New York, painting in both homes. In addition, she received an unexpected legacy from a friend, the poet Howard Griffin, inheriting his home in the Austrian Alps, and would make three painting trips there in the 1970s and 1980s. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts presented a solo exhibition of her work in 1979, and she received an honorary doctorate from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond in 1985. In 1995, the year before Blaine’s death, two concurrent exhibitions at Fischbach Gallery and Tibor de Nagy Gallery occasioned a review by Roberta Smith, in the *New York Times*. Smith noted, “Her images glow, but they also pulsate with a kind of molecular energy. At times she seems to have captured the incessant livingness of nature itself.”²⁶ Just as Blaine enjoyed the synthesis of the private studio world and the expansive work outside, she also thrived on the synthesis that she perceived in the evening hours – when waning light was joined by revived color and energy. Blaine stated, “The moment of the dying of the light is my favorite moment to paint landscape.

²⁵ Ibid., 128.

²⁶ Roberta Smith, “Precisely Cultivating a Lively Garden.” *New York Times*, 21 April 1995.

For me this time is a great flaring up of life and a revelation. I become more alive too.”²⁷

In her review, Smith had used the phrase “incessant livingness,” and it was this force that animated Blaine’s work and her life.

Career of Louisa Matthiasdottir

The career path of Louisa Matthiasdottir was quite different in that she did not have the same precocious, early career in the spotlight like De Niro and Blaine. Rather, Matthiasdottir had her first solo exhibition with the Jane Street Gallery in 1948, when she was 31 years old. She did not have another one-person exhibition until a decade later, 1958, when she was invited to show by the Tanager Gallery, the artists’ cooperative on East 10th Street, of which Philip Pearlstein and Charles Cajori were members.

Matthiasdottir had participated in only one group exhibition during this period – a show of small paintings and works on paper at Poindexter Gallery in 1957. Following the Tanager show, her next solo exhibition, her first at a commercial gallery, was in 1964 at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery. She was 47 years of age.

However, to show infrequently in one’s early career was not uncommon in that period; few contemporary art galleries existed in New York, and artists were not expected to establish their careers at young ages. Between the time of her shows at the Jane Street Gallery and Tanager Gallery, Matthiasdottir was gradually developing her signature style, while focusing on the subject matter of her family: portraits of her young daughter and her husband. Her paintings moved from those with cubist, Hofmann-influenced areas of color to looser, painterly, and naturalistic paintings like *Temma and Cat*, 1953 (fig. 5.8)

²⁷ Nell Blaine, interview by Martica Sawin, in Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 100.

and *Sigurdur A. Magnusson*, 1955. This work led to the bold and evocative portrait heads of Temma made in the early 1960s.

It was clear, even in these early years, that Matthiasdottir did not require external validation to continue on her artistic path. During this period, in 1961, Martica Sawin authored a profile of the artist for *Arts* magazine, in which she wrote,

There have been only two exhibitions of Louisa Matthiasdottir's paintings, the last at the Tanager Gallery three years ago. Consequently she is not inhibited by the pressure of working for shows, nor is she apparently discouraged by the lack of an outlet for her work. She is extremely reticent and unassuming regarding her painting, preferring to observe and to paint rather than to theorize about art, willing to perfect her performance and enlarge its scope while the canvases pile up in the studio.... It is gratifying to find an artist who knows clearly where she stands and establishes her position in convincing visual terms.²⁸

Matthiasdottir derived strength from the family unit, whereas Blaine had relied on her friends in the artistic community for energy and support. Thus, it was possible and indeed effective, for Matthiasdottir to gradually develop her mature style independently and without the benefit of inclusion in the avant-garde galleries and without the praise of prominent critics. However, in the early 1960s, she was included in two of the exhibitions of figurative painting that proliferated in this period, which I discussed in Chapter 3: "Five American Painters" at Knoedler, and "9 Realist Painters" at Robert Schoelkopf Gallery, both in 1963. The exhibition at Schoelkopf would lead to her twenty-six year association with the gallery, which lasted until the gallery's closure following Robert Schoelkopf's death in 1991.

Robert Schoelkopf's career as a dealer began with a partnership; in this sense it is similar to the beginnings of the Poindexter Gallery, and Elinor Poindexter's relationship

²⁸ Martica Sawin, "Profile: Louisa Matthiasdottir, A Painter of the Figure." *Arts* 36 (November 1961): 26-33.

to the Egan Gallery. Schoelkopf, born in Queens, New York, in 1927, was an art historian. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Yale College in 1951, and then taught at Yale while conducting graduate research. He became an independent dealer of American art in 1957. In 1959, he formed a partnership with Virginia Zabriskie in her gallery. Zabriskie had started her venture without financial backing and sales did not come easily in the early years. In a recent interview, Zabriskie was asked how the relationship with Schoelkopf began, and recalled with a laugh, “He was my only client.”²⁹ Schoelkopf’s partnership with Zabriskie lasted until 1962. Later that year, he opened his own gallery on the fourth floor of 825 Madison Avenue.

Schoelkopf predicted a rising interest and market for Hudson River School painting, and successfully built an inventory of this painting. He also showed lesser-known American modernists, like Joseph Stella, Jan Matulka, and Gaston Lachaise. He exhibited both 19th- and 20th-century photography, as well as contemporary photography, including the work of Eugene Atget, Julian Margaret Cameron, Brassai, and Walker Evans. However, the majority of his exhibitions were devoted to contemporary representational painting. In this category, Schoelkopf was clearly drawn to the more realist work: artists such as William Bailey and Gabriel Laderman. In this sense, the work of Matthiasdottir, and Bell (who also showed with Schoelkopf throughout the span of his gallery) was distinct from the gallery’s dominant aesthetic. As Schoelkopf’s career continued, he became even more attracted to narrative and the realist tendency. He wrote in 1982, “With age has come a hardening of the aesthetic arteries perhaps. What we have

²⁹ Maureen Mullarkey, “A Chat with a Dealer: Virginia Zabriskie’s 50 Years as a Friend of Art and Artists,” *The New York Sun*, 10 March 2005.

been showing is realism, but getting tighter all the time.”³⁰ Nevertheless, he and his wife, Jane Schoelkopf, who joined him in the gallery in 1975, continued to work happily with Bell and Matthiasdottir.

Matthiasdottir’s work outwardly expresses the importance of the family unit, their independence, and her own. In this way, the subject matter parallels her personal decisions and her career and life path, just as Blaine’s and De Niro’s work mirrored their world-views and public profiles. Matthiasdottir’s depictions of Temma reached an apex with the portrait heads and the images of Temma reading and reclining. Next she turned to her self-portrait as subject. Her painting *Self-Portrait with Still Life*, 1968 (fig. 5.9), projects the person and personality she was: strong, secure, independent, and private. Her private world was different from De Niro’s – melancholy and disdain did not dominate; rather a healthy detachment from the more mundane aspects of society liberated her artistic path and aesthetic development.

In this *Self-Portrait*, Matthiasdottir used all of the pictorial devices and approaches she had developed to this point to create a picture with both aesthetic and narrative force. Compared to her early work, the painting is more naturalistic and painterly, and her strokes had softened from the rough-hewn marks of the 1950s work. She also began to utilize the distinctive palette that characterizes a certain portion of her oeuvre – cool tones of white, gray, pale yellow, and lavender. She built a great deal of the composition with these slight tonal gradations, then off-set it with some darker tones of brown, deep purple, yellow, and, just on the right outer margins, four narrow rectangular color blocks of yellow, orange, gray and red that together suggest a room

³⁰ Robert Schoelkopf, letter to Lillian Delevoryas, March 17, 1982, Robert Schoelkopf Gallery records, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

beyond. In paintings such as this, each still life element has integrity and precision, even despite a fairly loose paint handling. Matthiasdottir thus lent these elements power, and she painted herself with the same boldness and power. Her form becomes monumental, and this steadiness is matched by the pose: one hand resting on her hip, the other on the table, an unwavering gaze, chiseled features and hairstyle.

In other paintings of the late 1960s, Matthiasdottir experimented with a more fluid, lyrical line that she matched against isolated, decisive forms, as in *Still Life with Pitcher*, 1967, (fig. 5.10) with the patterned flowing cloth, the luscious white vase, and flower and plant forms. This dichotomy led naturally to the work of the 1970s, with its play of silhouetted, simplified forms (figures and animals) against the landscape.

In this period, Matthiasdottir returned to her native Iceland in terms of subject matter, feeling, and an increased clarity of form (see fig. 5.11). Several of the paintings from the late 1960s and early 1970s are based on photographs. As others have noted about the relationship between her homeland and her work, the starkness of the Icelandic landscape (with its absence of trees) naturally inspired work where clear forms are silhouetted against bold, cubist ground. In addition, Matthiasdottir moved from complex tonal gradations of neutrals to more pure, vibrant unadulterated colors – red, green, yellow, blue.

Although Matthiasdottir was taking much inspiration from Iceland, and traveling there frequently (she began to spend summers there regularly in 1974), it would take time before Icelandic institutions, critics, and collectors took note of her work. Sigurdur Magnusson noted her Tanager exhibition and the critical response to it, in *Morgunbladid*,

the Icelandic newspaper, in 1958.³¹ However, her work was first exhibited in Iceland in 1974, as part of the Association of Icelandic Artists exhibition. Her first solo exhibition in Iceland was not held until 1987, at Galeri Borg in Reykjavik. Infrequently, articles appeared on her work, such as those by Adalsteinn Ingolfsson, who became a supporter and expert on her work, and would become the Chief Curator of the National Gallery of Iceland, and later the Director of the Museum of Design in Reykjavik. Ingolfsson is another writer who has puzzled over Matthiasdottir's reticence, seeming modesty, and lack of interest in self-promotion to advance her career. He later reflected on these qualities as it affected both herself, and her work:

The dignity and forthrightness of [Matthiasdottir's] *Self-Portrait in a Landscape*, tinged as it is with self-deprecating irony, is also something which I find very Icelandic. It brings to mind a long line of strong women in Icelandic history and literature, who let men get on with their business while quietly working things to their own advantage behind the scenes. These were proud women of few but pithy words, great willpower and deep feeling masked by irony or double-edged humor.³²

Ingolfsson also linked similar qualities of detachment to Matthiasdottir's ability to synthesize the Icelandic landscape into her unique vision. He wrote:

In her own way, Matthiasdottir has staked a claim to the Icelandic landscape... Her absence from Iceland has given her interpretation of its landscape an objectivity, and thus an understanding of essentials, which is lacking in the work of most of her stay-at-home colleagues. Instead of plunging into raw nature, becoming one with it, which is how Icelandic landscape painters from Johannes S. Kjarval onwards have usually approached it, Matthiasdottir calmly analyzes the lay of the land and then builds up a tight structure of wedge-like forms that carry the eye step-by-step from foreground, be it multi-colored houses or sheep, to blue background.³³

³¹ Sigurdur A. Magnusson, "Icelandic Artist Gets Good Review in New York," *Morgunbladid*, 9 September 1958, 11.

³² Adalsteinn Ingolfsson, "Louisa Matthiasdottir: Giantess in a Landscape," *Scandinavian Review* 82 (Winter 1994): 60.

³³ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

Janet Hobhouse had noted similar qualities of detachment and modesty when writing about Matthiasdottir in 1979:

“She is just a painter,” she will say, and painting “is just my nature.” It is not her nature to think about her art in any but the most elemental terms or to acknowledge that she is among the best painters working today. Nevertheless, that is the case.³⁴

It was perplexing to people, especially critics, in an age of self-promotion and increased commercializing of art, for an artist to be so reticent about one’s work.

Certainly Matthiasdottir’s personality kept her from being as well known in the art world as she might have been. However, this path worked for her, as it was liberating, allowing her to focus devotedly on her work. Her detachment, furthermore, did not have a devastating affect on her career. Her work was shown every two years at Schoelkopf for many years, she was included in the Whitney Biennial in 1973, and eventually achieved fairly wide and deep recognition. The energy and support she received from her family and from her own will and inner resources was sustaining. In fact, she was exhibited in many two-person shows with her husband (in 1966, at the Kansas City Art Institute and at Bard College; in 1967, at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut; and in 1972, at the Swain School of Art in New Bedford, Massachusetts). Soon after, there would be three-person exhibitions, as their daughter Temma became a painter in her own right (“A Family of Painters,” at the Canton Art Institute in Canton, Ohio, 1973).

Matthiasdottir’s detachment and reticence also allowed her work to speak for itself, without interference. In the first chapter, I discussed Hofmann’s theory of push-and-pull and “projection” in relation to Matthiasdottir’s work – her ability to depict an essential vision of nature. Her viewpoint was synthesized into the artwork, rather than

³⁴ Janet Hobhouse, “Independent Icelander,” *Quest* (April 1979): 98-100.

projected onto it externally by anything she said, or her personality. Furthermore, in the absence of the artist's self-proclaimed ideas or attitudes, there was more space for the viewer to project his/her own interpretation or experience into the paintings. This worked in her favor career-wise, too. When Steven Harvey was working with her on organizing a traveling retrospective of her work, Matthiasdottir noted to him that she never made requests or demands, but people were always stepping in to do things for her.³⁵

Her later works of the 1980s and 1990s display the consummate mastery, freshness, and saturated color that has defined them as quintessential Matthiasdottir paintings. Her friend, De Niro, had advocated for "understatement," spontaneity and ease, and Matthiasdottir's approach, in her later decades, demonstrated this especially. It seems that with parsed means, more was evoked. Perl discussed the convergence of enigma, distillation, and clarity in her later work, issues also raised by John Ashbery, in his reviews and essays on her work.³⁶ Her last decades were marked by increased public acknowledgment both in the United States and Iceland. In 1988 she was awarded the Icelandic Medal of Honor, and in 1996, she was given the Cultural Award of the American-Scandinavian Foundation. She became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1998. She outlived her husband, Bell, by eight years, but she stopped painting a few years before her death, in January of 2000.

Career of Paul Resika

³⁵ Steven Harvey recalls that Matthiasdottir made this statement in 1995. Harvey, in conversation with author, 28 February 2010.

³⁶ Jed Perl, "A Modern Woman," in Jed Perl, ed., *Louisa Matthiasdottir* (Reykjavik: Nesútgáfan Publishing, 1999), 150-166; John Ashbery, "Metaphysical Overtones," *New York Magazine*, 10 February 1980, 72-73.

Resika's "re-entry" into the gallery scene in New York, following his sojourn in Italy and into Baroque painting, happened the same year that Matthiasdottir began her own regular exhibition schedule – 1964. Resika, in that year, had his first solo show since his debut with George Dix in 1948, exhibiting with the Peridot Gallery run by Louis Pollack. He would have six exhibitions with Peridot through 1970, when Pollack died suddenly in Corsica at age 49. Joan Washburn took over the Peridot Gallery, and Resika had two exhibitions with her in the early 1970s, before moving to the Graham Gallery, where he showed throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Resika was anachronistic; he did not embrace at face value the modern and the new. His romantic spirit, and the value he placed on the integrity of proven masters inspired his journey back into art history. Resika, however, was not compelled to isolate himself socially and he maintained connections in the avant-garde art world. Resika compared his own ideas about the painters' milieu, and the scene at the Cedar Bar to De Niro's perspective:

They [the New York School painters] were friends of mine. I didn't go in [the Cedar Bar] often, but I didn't have a rule against it. Bob De Niro, who is a true modern painter, and never went through this anti-modern stuff wouldn't cross the threshold of the Cedar Bar... He had a position on it. Because he was really a modern painter before any of them, when he was just a kid... before de Kooning, actually, and he wasn't getting the credit.³⁷

Instead of the Cedar Bar, Resika chose to spend time at what he considered the hang-out of the romantic set, the Café Rienzi on Macdougall Street. It was there he met his second wife, Brenda (Gia) Moscarella . He associates the café with making alternative connections and friendships among artists who are working against the grain:

³⁷ Paul Resika, interview by Avis Berman, 20 May 2004, transcript, The National Academy of Design Oral History Project, New York, 1-56 – 1-57.

Little by little you find people who are doing the same mad things...For instance there was this painter from Vienna, named Ernst Fuchs, who became very famous; he became the richest painter in the world. He led the magic realism movement in Vienna about twenty years ago...I painted in the Venetian way and he painted in the Flemish way. He was a kind of genius. He stayed with me for a few weeks, and we became friends. You meet people, like other people, who are not so extreme, like David Grossblatt, who is a modern painter, but still, Balthus is his master, you might say. He owned the first café, the Rienzi. There were bars and coffeehouses, they were very different. The coffeehouses were for the romantic young people, and the bars were for the tougher ones. I preferred the coffeehouses. There were very few of the abstract painters in the coffeehouses...Of course, the old timers, from the Village, like De Kooning, they'd be anywhere. It was a little corny, and romantic - you had to like Italian and things like that. That was foreign to the spirit of the Abstract Expressionists.³⁸

While the regular exhibition phase of Resika's career occurred in the same year as Matthiasdottir's (1964), Resika's re-entry into the art world after a long hiatus between exhibitions is perceived by him and others as dramatic, while hers has not been commented on as such.³⁹ This is most likely because the circumstances were so different: Resika's aesthetic shift from a Hofmann/cubist-derived approach to neo-Baroque was extreme and idiosyncratic, whereas Matthiasdottir's work developed along a continuous path. Resika reflected on his exhibition hiatus later, stating that this time represented "the ten years of silence which I believe artists need to find themselves – before they start to exhibit their work. For instance, it took me a long time to know where and how to place a figure in a landscape, and like many other artists, I wanted the ability to paint a Venus."⁴⁰

³⁸ Paul Resika, interview by author, 14 November 2002.

³⁹ In "Early Years in New York," Martica Sawin focuses only on Matthiasdottir's developing maturity and respect as she discusses her inclusion in the 1959 Tanager exhibition and her representation by the Schoelkopf Gallery in 1964; In "A Modern Woman," Jed Perl writes of the growing outsider status that marks her reputation in the 1960s and 1970s but does not dwell on a slow-to-start career. Both essays in Jed Perl, ed., *Louisa Matthiasdottir* (Reykjavik: Nesútgáfan Publishing, 1999).

⁴⁰ Paul Resika, as cited in a press release, Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College, May 8, 1972. Paul Resika Archives, New York.

All of the painters discussed here found that maintaining a connection to the past, and to the European tradition, was necessary, but the degree to which Resika found it necessary to embrace it, by literally working in an old-master style, exceeds the others. His anachronistic perspective is evidenced in many of his artistic tastes, and these opinions affected his relationships and conversations with his peers. For example, he remembers disagreeing with the reverence Fairfield Porter and his circle had for William Carlos Williams, “He was the guru of Fairfield and all those people, and I didn’t like that. That’s all they talked about was William Carlos Williams. It was a pain in the ass. I would have much rather they talked about Shelley or Robinson Jeffers, or whatever.”⁴¹ The choices are telling – Williams was a modernist who tried to invent a new American form, implicitly rejecting the past. Resika suggested the alternative of Shelley, the English romantic, or the American poet Robinson Jeffers, who worked in epic narrative form and valued the natural beauty of the world.

As Resika began to exhibit with the Peridot Gallery, he gradually found his place back into the art world. Louis Pollack is remembered as a dealer who respected genuineness and conviction from the artists, rather than devotion to current style.⁴² Schoelkopf (whose gallery was located across the street from Peridot) wrote that Pollack “came to favor neither the figurative nor the abstract in painting, but cared for a highly personal or intimate art.” Similarly, Hess wrote of Pollack, “he liked a special kind of lyric painting – either abstract or realist – which evokes the pastoral and the contemplative mood.” In this sense, the partnership of Pollack and Resika was ideal. Furthermore, Schoelkopf stated:

⁴¹ Paul Resika, interview by Avis Berman, 4-15.

⁴² Robert Goldwater statement, in *In Memoriam, Louis Pollack, 1921-1970: Peridot Gallery 1948-1970* (New York: Peridot Gallery, 1970).

[Pollack] seemed both an ideal and an anachronism. In a day when the tendency of art galleries was toward ever larger establishments, he was a loner – not as a person, for he began running a gallery because he enjoyed the company of artists – but as an individual exercising his own taste, showing the art he personally liked, and hoping, expecting to find a market for it because of its ultimate quality.⁴³

The sentiment, here, is similar to Resika’s own approach to his artwork.

The Peridot Gallery opened in 1948 in a space on 12th Street, where Pollack mostly showed abstraction, giving the first shows to artists such as Louise Bourgeois, James Brooks, and Philip Guston, before this type of work was in favor. Rosemarie Beck also exhibited with Peridot, beginning in 1953, and continuing until Pollack’s death in 1970. For the first five or six years Pollack operated a frame shop out of the back of the gallery to maintain financial self-sufficiency. The gallery soon moved uptown, to Madison Avenue and 68th Street. Pollack’s brother was the painter Reginald Pollack. Resika recalls that Reginald prevailed upon his brother to consider Resika’s work, and eventually, as Pollack began to incorporate art that was not abstract, he did. Resika considered him unique:

It was across the street from Schoelkopf, which was a similar gallery. But he was there before Schoelkopf. He had no ideology whatsoever, whereas Schoelkopf was getting a kind of figurative painting. He was a dealer who was formed from French taste. No other gallery could see this quality, but he could see the quality – and honor. He was so elegant in the way that he treated you.⁴⁴

In his first show at Peridot, Resika exhibited a mix of portraits and landscapes, and reviewers grappled with what to make of this re-entry for the former Hofmann student. Kim Levin focused on the “reverse metamorphosis” his work had undergone but noted that, “As befits a former Hofmann student, he does it all with color and closeness

⁴³ Statements by Robert Schoelkopf and Thomas Hess, in *In Memoriam, Louis Pollack, 1921-1970*.

⁴⁴ Paul Resika, interview by Avis Berman, 31 May 2004, 2-15.

of tone.”⁴⁵ Sidney Tillim, however, wrote, “It is interesting that Resika is another of Hans Hofmann’s students who apparently reacted violently to his influence. Resika’s last show in 1948 consisted of abstractions.”⁴⁶

The drama of Resika’s re-introduction stabilized, however, and 1964 not only marked the new relationship with Peridot, but also a shift in the tone and substance of his work. 1960-64 were the years when Resika was married to Moscarella, and the two had a son, Nathan. Resika had painted portraits of the family that were tributes to Rembrandt and were painted completely in the manner of the old masters. In 1964, his personal circumstances changed and so did his art, as he was divorced from Moscarella and began the relationship with Blair Philips that led him to the landscape of her family’s summer home in Cape Cod. In the paintings of Blair around Horseleech pond in Wellfleet and the ocean beach, Resika forged his own motif, even as he relied on the art historical precedent of the Venus.

Through the late 1960s and into the early 1970s, he exhibited at Peridot Gallery paintings of Blair posed before the water, waves, and sea (see figs. 5.12 and 5.13). He formed a comfort level and familiarity with the motif which allowed him to simplify the painterly vocabulary and move away from excessive realism and finish. The figure of the nude, the tall body and curve of wide hips, and the ripples of water behind all became simplified forms – a painterly shorthand. By using this shorthand to represent forms, Resika could more easily access the lessons of Hofmann that had formed him as an artist. The figure of Blair became almost abstract; her figure was treated as a volume. In Chapter 1, I discussed how Resika internalized Hofmann’s ideas about core volumes and

⁴⁵ Kim Levin, “Review and Previews,” *Art News* 63 (April 1964): 15.

⁴⁶ Sidney Tillim, “In the Galleries,” *Arts* 38 (May-June 1964): 41.

“voluminosity”; this is reflected in Resika’s treatment of the female nude in these paintings.

It was Resika’s ability to fuse the sophisticated technical means with painterly abstraction that led Patricia Mainardi to comment on his small *plein-air* paintings in a 1975 exhibition:

They are raised out of the realm of the sketch...by a very sophisticated dialectic involving paint and illusion. A thoroughly illusionistic wave will abruptly end in a pile of white paint, or what begins as a heavily impastoed brushstroke for sunlit sand will just as abruptly change color and become as immaterial as shade on a beach...There is a nice dialogue between their tiny size, the huge vistas they portray, the large brushstrokes that cause a cloud or a beach to emerge from a single stroke, down to the wiry scratchings in wet paint that become tree branches.⁴⁷

In 1971 Resika had opened an exhibition at the Peridot Gallery (which had become the Peridot-Washburn Gallery, following Pollack’s death). The exhibition, entitled “The Valley of Tepoztlan,” consisted of work Resika made in Mexico the year before, when Blair’s mother was living there. Two paintings from the exhibition sold: *Ochlayo* was purchased for the Chase Manhattan Bank corporate collection, and, later that year, *The Great Rocks* was bought by the Sara Roby Foundation, which supported contemporary figurative artists.⁴⁸

However, the day after the exhibition opened, a fire broke out in Washington Mews, and destroyed most of the Mews houses, as well as many of the studios in 3 Washington Square North, including Resika’s. It destroyed most of Resika’s paintings of the past twenty years, and the few that were saved were damaged. The fire, although certainly a trauma, did not seem to halt Resika’s progress. Neither did it change his work

⁴⁷ Patricia Mainardi, “New York Reviews: Paul Resika,” *Art News* 74 (Summer 1975): 149.

⁴⁸ The foundation’s collection, including Resika’s painting, was later donated to the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

immediately, despite the fact that Resika, attempting to be optimistic, tried to see it as an opportunity to get a fresh start and let go of the old.⁴⁹ He continued to work on the paintings of Horseleech Pond, and to develop the motif of figures near the water.

In 1972, his friend Alan Gussow, an environmentalist and an artist, compiled the book *A Sense of Place: The Artist and the American Land*, which illustrated thirty-seven landscapes throughout history, including Resika's painting *Horseleech Pond, Dark Bank*, along with Resika's statement on the painting. Resika wrote of his motif:

You couldn't say about this pond that it is a spectacular landscape. It is an intimate corner, but it isn't picturesque. . . . It is a fresh-water pond, has fish, geese, lilies. The dunes separate it by not more than 200 feet from the ocean. The trees come down to the bank. . . . It is enclosed, almost like a stage, yet there is no central figure on that stage. It is undramatic, except for this darkness, except for some bit of contrast. The Cape that has this dramatic sea is ordinary land. Even when it is clear on the Cape, the light is soft. If you are high up in the tropics everything is different. There is no atmosphere between objects. The Cape has a long twilight and so does the whole temperate world. We have a light of sentiment. To an outdoor painter it's light more than topography.⁵⁰

Resika's phrase "a light of sentiment" was so evocative that it was used as the title of a *New Yorker* review of the book, and also quoted in the *Newsweek* book review.⁵¹ It perfectly expressed the achievement of Resika's work at this point in his career, in that he had found a way to incorporate the tonal expression of the 19th-century landscape painters he admired. In addition, "sentiment"—or Resika's personal attraction to the subject—elevated his work beyond homage to old masters into truly personal expression.

⁴⁹ In interview by Avis Berman, Resika called the experience of starting anew after a fire, "exciting." Paul Resika, interview by Avis Berman, 31 May 2004, 2-54, 2-56-57.

⁵⁰ Paul Resika, statement excerpted from interview by Alan Gussow, in Gussow, *A Sense of Place: The Artist and the American Land* (San Francisco: Friends of the Earth/Saturday Review Press, 1972).

⁵¹ L.E. Sissman, "A Light of Sentiment," *New Yorker*, 16 September 1972, 123-125; "Book Review: A Sense of Place," *Newsweek*, 12 June 1972, 107.

The same year, Resika was also appointed an artist-in-residence for the spring semester at Dartmouth College. The appointment was a welcome distraction from the issues of finding a new studio in New York. At Dartmouth, Resika had a solo exhibition of work made over the prior five years. These activities marked a new level and stability in his career: his shows were consistently reviewed. Resika's public voice became more clear and comfortable. He participated in a 1976 protest of the restoration of Renaissance paintings at the Metropolitan Museum, and was quoted in the *New York Times*.⁵² He delivered lectures at the Skowhegan School in Maine in 1973 and 1976. In 1978, he was hired to develop the Master of Fine Arts program at Parsons. In 1974, he was also quoted in an article on Hofmann's teaching.⁵³ Resika acknowledged to its author, Diane Cochrane, "I was terribly opposed to his teaching for ten years; then, for five years, I suspected he was right; now I realize he is the biggest influence on my painting." Resika was certainly not part of the spotlight in the New York art world, but he had created a viable career for himself, participating in numerous group exhibitions and regular solo shows. In the late 1970s, Resika moved from the Washburn Gallery to the Graham Gallery, and began showing with two galleries on Cape Cod: the cooperative Longpoint, and Berta Walker Gallery.

A statement of Resika's was also published alongside an essay by Gussow in *American Artist* in 1976.⁵⁴ The two essays constituted a written debate about how environmentally conscious the landscape painter should be. Resika contended that the artist need not immerse himself in nature nor work exclusively outdoors. Rather, the

⁵² Grace Glueck, "Artists Protest Restorations at the Met," *New York Times*, 18 February 1976, 22.

⁵³ Paul Resika, as cited in Diane Cochrane, "The Teachings of Hans Hofmann: Push and Pull" *American Artist* 38 (March 1974): 26-35; 63-65.

⁵⁴ Paul Resika, "Forum Page: Must an Artist Know Landscape in Order to Paint It?" *American Artist* 40 (September 1976): 13.

vocabulary of painting is primary. However, Resika maintained that, in his own work, nature was indispensable for inspiration and variety. He wrote, “For myself, I don’t go to nature to express its inner forces – whatever they may be – but to avoid regularity, poverty of form. In short, to be inspired.” This became the constant throughout Resika’s career and his stylistic development: a real motif inspired the paintings and was translated into painterly shorthand. Resika found both nature and “abstract” painting integral. It was his ability to synthesize them that propelled his career. This synthesis yielded work like his *Pier* paintings of the 1980s, where light, form, and nature come together (see fig. 5.14). The houses and vessels became iconic, volumetric forms. Similarly, his most recent paintings can hover at the edge of abstraction even as they are inspired by reality and by a romantic vision of the world.

Resika’s conflict was not with his peers or his dealers, but with the institutionally-accepted tastes and the ideology of the art world. He positioned himself against this by valuing, above all, the painting of the past, beauty, and form. Resika, reflecting on his career, noted:

Most artists hate dealers...But I’ve always gotten on with my dealers. I’ve always thought it was a great thing that they wanted to show my work. I guess it’s my nature to be confrontational with the art world, but not with dealers. My friend Paul Goerges was always confronting them. And Bob De Niro hated them.⁵⁵

Resika continued, “Compared to other painters I know, I have had a hundred times the success, and in every way. So how can I be bitter, or whatever it is? As Pavia told a friend of mine, ‘Don’t be bitter, you’ll lose your courage.’”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Paul Resika, interview by Avis Berman, 6 December 2004, 3-60-61.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-61-62.

The Alliance of Figurative Artists

The Alliance of Figurative Artists was a response to the challenges these painters had, by the late 1960s, in maintaining dynamic careers and public profiles. The meetings also functioned as a soapbox for them, since their opportunities to express ideas, theory, and to show their work were limited. It began in 1969, and Larry Faden, who was involved in founding the Alliance, remembers that it was conceived as a forum for younger figurative painters to meet with the older generation and gain support and a forum for their work.⁵⁷ Faden enlisted Paul Georges's help to invite painters to the first meeting, in order to attract the more established artists like Alice Neel, Raphael Soyer, George Spaventa, who would all play an important role in the Alliance, along with Larry Rivers, Philip Pearlstein, Lois Dodd and Alex Katz. They were joined by the younger generation, including John Bradford, Anthony Santuoso, and Sam Thurston. Richard McDermott Miller, who was the program director for the Alliance for several years, considered the purpose was to "discuss the prospects for figurative art."⁵⁸ The first few meetings were held in artists' lofts, including Alfred Leslie's, before the meeting space was established at the Educational Alliance on East Broadway on the Lower East Side. Meetings were held on Fridays and artists agreed on a loose format to have a speaker on the first meeting of the month, and a panel discussion on the second week. The third week artists would bring work, and the fourth week was an open format. The artists who attended had extremely partisan ideas about what direction figurative art should take. Arguments were frequent and fierce, and although at times efforts were made to quell the

⁵⁷ Larry Faden, in conversation with author, 10 December 2009.

⁵⁸ Richard McDermott Miller, statement made at Alliance of Figurative Artists meeting, 12 November 1970, tape recording, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C..

bad feeling, this atmosphere became a hallmark of the Alliance. It was not uncommon for invited speakers to be met with catcalls and insults. Sam Thurston writes,

The Alliance was made up of groups or camps - different approaches to figurative art. Miller referred to the disagreement between the 'brushy and non-brushy' painters. Later, Philip Pearlstein saw it as the "heads vs. the guts" and Marjorie Portnow as 'Wets vs. drys.'⁵⁹

In a recent exhibition catalog essay on Gabriel Laderman, Lincoln Perry provided an evocative description of the Alliance's feisty atmosphere:

When the larger-than-life personalities at these get-togethers took positions on such issues as the linear versus the painterly (which some had the good humor to call tight versus sloppy), one didn't see gentlemanly debates on Wolfflin's art historical categories. These were knock-down, drag-out fights, almost coming to blows. Linear versus painterly? Why not say moral clarity versus sentimentalized expressionism! No, on the contrary, we're talking about dutiful rendering versus emotional honesty! Picasso's neoclassical period? Work done in bad faith! No, it points the way out of the abstract woods! Aesthetics and ethics were somehow inseparable when it came to form making, color, pictorial depth, or narrative.

And though such lines were drawn on principle, powerful personalities were certainly involved. Aristodimos Kaldis, a self-proclaimed naif, arrived at the party like some Zorbatic Ancient Mariner, warning all against over-sophistication. Paul Georges and his beer-guzzling henchmen appropriated the macho muscle of abstract expression and distrusted too much ideation – perhaps even thought. Leland had his own cohorts and insisted the only acceptable thread of influence came through Derain to Balthus, Giacometti, and Héliou, and any other path was unacceptable. Not just misguided, but unethical. Bell's magnetic eyes would bulge dangerously from their sockets as he fulminated like an angry god, even if his opponent was as elderly as Alice Neel. "Age makes no difference, Alice!!!" Bell roared one evening, towering over the aged Circe, while she continued knitting as if Bell were no more than a hovering fly. Neel loved getting under other people's skin. Any number of strong women attended. Some, like Rosemarie Beck, happily joined the fray, breathing the testosterone-laden air, while others, like Louisa Matthiasdottir, radiated silent authority. Lennart Anderson was similarly reticent, distancing himself from the Sturm und Drang, for his was a diffident stance, both modest and arrogant. "I'm not so good," he would say, "but everyone else is worse."... The Alliance was heady stuff... It was

⁵⁹ Samuel Thurston, "History of the Alliance of Figurative Artists," [online], available from <http://www.samthurstonandmarjoriekram.vox.com>, 15 May 2008.

as if the soul of the world hung in the balance, and we all had to take responsibility for what our work would mean. After all, our country was then embroiled in a catastrophic military debacle halfway around the world; the government was not to be trusted; and people had taken to the streets. Issues, even artistic ones, were all interrelated. One had to take a stand.⁶⁰

The debates ultimately created different factions, and the older painters gained followings of supporters and acolytes for their individual views. This helped, somewhat, to advance their careers, in that they became less solitary figures and more leaders of a movement. Georges was a prime example – he had no qualms about insulting anyone whose views were opposed to his own, to the point of turning these debates into actual fistfights in the bar gatherings that followed the meetings. Members remember the extended argument between Georges and Tony Siani, a younger painter who had been very close to Georges, but with whom the older painter began to disagree. The argument escalated when Georges painted *The Mugging of the Muse* (fig. 5.15), depicting Siani and another painter Anthony Santuoso mugging Georges’s own daughter. They sued him for libel and the case went all the way to the Supreme Court, which eventually overturned a lower court’s initial judgment against Georges.⁶¹

All of the internal arguing was symbolic of a movement that never became cohesive. These painters were so concerned with the “ethics” of their aesthetic choices, as Perry puts it, that they could not see the larger picture of needing to create a community that would have strength in numbers. Lennart Anderson suggested that the argumentative nature of the Alliance was actually a consequence of their marginalization

⁶⁰ Lincoln Perry, “Cool and Hot,” in *Gabriel Laderman: Unconventional Realist*, Exh. cat. (Durham: University of New Hampshire, 2008).

⁶¹ Paul Georges, interview by author, 16 March 2000; *The Mugging of the Muse* and related paintings, Georges’s involvement with the Alliance of Figurative Artists, and the ideology which motivated both, is the focus of the second chapter of Stanley Grand’s dissertation; See Stanley Grand, “Allegories of Freedom in the Paintings of Paul Georges” (Ph.D. diss., Madison: The University of Washington, 1993), 64-95.

in the art world – because they were not successful, they argued amongst themselves about what was right and wrong. Anderson compared it to the Club, which was successful as a gathering-place before the Abstract Expressionists started selling work and making money. Once they were making a living, the Club started to dissolve.⁶² Certainly, the Alliance, as a phenomenon and a meeting-place for people and ideas, was incredibly successful. It lasted from 1969 into the 1980s, with weekly meetings. Peter Heinemann called it a “cheap Friday night out,” a place to gather with “entertainment” and a cup of coffee.⁶³

Around the same time as the Alliance was founded, several new figurative art cooperative galleries began as well, like the Bowery Gallery, the First Street Gallery, and Prince Street Gallery. The Alliance and these galleries were very much formed in the spirit of the time: collective, anti-authoritarian activity. In the same period, the feminist artist cooperative galleries were also founded (A.I.R. in 1972, and Soho20 in 1973). However, women in attendance at the Alliance meetings bumped up against old-guard, engrained sexist attitudes manifested in rude, dismissive behavior. Women were not invited to speak on panels, and when women in the audience dared to speak, men would deliberately ignore them. Patricia Mainardi remembered Kaldis grabbing at women’s breasts and butts, and the others just laughing. Marjorie Kramer, who stated that she “rarely missed a meeting... because [she] put painting first and feminism second,” recalled an incident representative of many similar ones:

I remember sitting next to an older woman artist, Dorothy Block. She pulled herself together to speak after an hour of listening and when she rose to say something it seemed like all the men in the room turned to

⁶² Lennart Anderson, in conversation with author, 11 December 2009.

⁶³ Peter Heinemann, as quoted by Larry Faden, in conversation with author, 10 December 2009.

their neighbor and started to talk to them, not listening to the intense and nervous Dorothy.⁶⁴

Kramer later discovered in reading Richard Miller's transcripts of recordings of Alliance meetings that he identified the male speakers, but did not bother to identify the women, instead writing "a woman" before their remarks.

Against the backdrop of a forum where women as artists and thinkers were ignored, came a constant presentation of the male artists' paintings of female nudes. The definition of the term "figurative" was debated, and while for some it meant landscape or still life, for others, the female body was the core subject. The juxtaposition of sexist behavior and female nudes became jarring, especially to younger female artists in attendance who were part of a burgeoning feminist consciousness. Kramer remembered wondering what it all meant: "Women were supposed to be seen and not heard!? It was okay for us to be symbols or sex objects or goddesses but not unglamorous hardworking painters." She and Mainardi wanted to get women to speak on the panels but they had trouble: "We had to get past Richard Miller and the Steering Committee." They decided to organize a panel of women artists, and women artists' relationship to the nude." They were taunted and called extremists, and in response Mainardi made heart-shaped lapel pins stating "Extreme and proud of it." Kramer recalled:

We had that panel. We called up women who almost never went to meetings because the Alliance meetings had the reputation of being sort of like the wild west bar room, and people knew that women were not taken seriously there. Many women brought work; [it was] a big, big panel [because] we felt we were under siege [and] needed numbers. [The panel included] Alice Neel (actually Alice went quite often), Janet Sawyer, me, Pat, and Juanita McNeely as moderator - we picked her she is tall and those guys did not know her; she put her hair up and wore a suit jacket to get more respect! Lois Dodd, Lucia Vernarelli, Irene Peslikis, Ora

⁶⁴ Marjorie Kramer, 17 February 2010, *P.G. and Alliance* (email to author).

Lerman, Tomar Levine, more. We sat on a raised platform and put our work on the walls behind us; the work was strong.⁶⁵

The session, like many at the Alliance, developed into a near riot, and that night Kaldis bellowed at Alice Neel, “You’ve got to paint with your balls!” She responded sweetly and without hesitation, “Oh, but I do. Mine are just bigger and higher up!” while holding and lifting up her breasts.

The issue of how the problematic, sexist behavior relates to the images, and how it fits in with a movement already dismissed by parts of the establishment as “retrograde,” is complicated. Georges, who exemplified the outrageous and macho behavior characteristic of the Alliance, made the “muse” – the female nude – his primary subject. The line between the behavior and the images became blurred for friends and acquaintances of Georges, who struggled to come to terms with his work and his personality – which swung wildly between cruel and nurturing. For instance, his close friend and peer, Peter Heinemann, said:

What I felt was that he was secretly a male chauvinist, racist, and I would see that in his work, and it would piss me off. On the other hand, there were many things I admired, though we had been adversaries, and come to blows several times. The last ten years, he was much softer, more approachable, and I really had affection for him. He had so much energy, so much life force. And nothing that I would say for or against him would begin to come to the value of the man he was. He was an amazing person, the most amazing artist I know.⁶⁶

Kramer has similarly struggled with her feelings about Georges and his paintings:

In 1969-1971 I used to criticize Georges for the way his painted women were nude, young, and very much sexual goddesses, symbolic objects to be enjoyed and stared at – i.e. the Muse. But he was honest and revealed his sense of wonder at the female form as one of the glories of being human. His images were not at all like Playboy Magazine's. He painted some nude self portraits that were not idealized at all. ... I think I started

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Peter Heinemann, interview by author, 17 October 2002.

out feeling critical of him in the 1960s, but then changed my feelings. ... I still think it is kind of funny that such a noisy and outrageous, even macho kind of guy, did perhaps his best work of his family, and flowers – such intimate subjects, sort of girly in a way. He worked very hard and persistently and with passion on his art and that was what I wanted to get from him.⁶⁷

Rhonda Lieberman, an art critic and former student of Georges treated the same conflict in an exhibition catalogue essay.⁶⁸ While admitting that the male as artist/ female as model/muse trope “rankled,” she appreciated certain aspects of Georges’s outrageous behavior, since it provided a contrast to the more standard “phony” art world behavior of the 1980s. Her evocative portrait of Georges shows how the formal / aesthetic issues were in fact inextricably linked for him with the personal and political:

... in Georges’s studio... [there was] an almost archetypal distinction between Edenic unselfconsciousness – and being enslaved by the ‘baloney’ that keeps us down – from gravity and the horizon line, to pigeonholes and moralizing policepeople. You can’t understand Georges without knowing these were life problems and they were also painting problems – with painting solutions!⁶⁹

The Alliance, similarly, treated “painting problems” with such fervor – they were moral-ethical dilemmas, which demanded unwavering positions, and, if necessary, were defended in fiery debates or physical fights.

Conclusion: Apart from the *Zeitgeist*

The painter Alice Neel said that she intended her portraits to be both an expression of the specific person, but also an expression of the “Zeitgeist, the spirit of the age.” She was proud that she could “produce definitive pictures with the feel of the

⁶⁷ Kramer, *P.G. and Alliance*.

⁶⁸ Rhonda Lieberman, “Sing, O Muse...of Paul Georges,” in *Paul Georges: Last Paintings*, Exh. cat. (New York: Salander O’Reilly Galleries, 2003), n.p.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, n.p.

era.”⁷⁰ Neel was a figurative painter in the same period as the artists I have treated here, and, in her time, she was also fairly marginalized. However, she has since become part of the accepted history of the period, albeit representing a trend different from Minimalism and Pop. The same holds true for figurative painters Alex Katz, Larry Rivers, and Philip Pearlstein. The artists I have treated in this dissertation stand apart, perhaps due to their conscious or unconscious distancing from the “Zeitgeist.” In both their choices of subject matter and in some of their formal choices, they looked to sources other than those reflecting their own period. This stance ultimately affected their careers and limited their success with major institutions, critics and dealers. Nevertheless, their work was never purely nostalgic or deferential to the past. It was lifted out of this realm by their attention to abstract formal structure, direct painterly approach, stylized form, and their intellectual involvement with avant-garde aesthetic theory.

⁷⁰ Alice Neel, “Alice by Alice,” in Patricia Hills, *Alice Neel* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983), 167.

CONCLUSION

In 1970, the poet and art writer, John Ashbery, began an *Art News* article with the sentence, “Lee Bell is a painter and a polemicist.”¹ One could easily argue that Bell was the most polemical of the painters discussed here – certainly he was one of the most outspoken, dynamic, and enthusiastic public speakers and teachers. However, in his or her own ways, each of the painterly figurative artists I have treated was polemical. The art historical literature has marginalized this generation, but their ideology has been especially ignored. Their ideas posited a formalist continuity between art of the past and contemporary art. However, a reactive dismissal of the artists as retrograde prevents us from seeing how their ideology was formed in the context of the most avant-garde thinking. Their ideas were, in fact, characterized by and informed by a kind of dialectical synthesis that also marked Hans Hofmann’s theory.

In fact, although I have argued that the painterly representational artists considered Clement Greenberg’s position too rigid, they also accepted several aspects of his theory, including the idea of the artist as a heroic individual and the rejection of “kitsch.”² Bell, Matthiasdottir, and Georges all painted large, frontal self portraits which serve as a visual declarations of their significance, and take a place in the art historical tradition of paintings such as Courbet’s *The Meeting, or Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet* (1854) and his *The Painter’s Studio: A Real Allegory* (1855).³ They lionized an alternate

¹ John Ashbery, “Bell: Virtuosity without Self-Interest,” *Art News* 68 (February 1970): 45.

² Clement Greenberg, “Avant Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6 (1939): 34-49.

³ Robert De Niro in fact made a painting after Courbet’s *The Meeting*, entitled *Bonjour Mr. De Niro* (1956).

pantheon of art historical masters and wanted to see their own work and projects in this context. Their rejection of “kitsch” manifested as this prioritizing of the art historical tradition, and their dismissal of anything from popular culture as possible subject matter. The rigorous insistence on formal issues as primary was also a way of maintaining a connection to abstraction and Greenberg’s ideas, although they had moved into painterly representation.

Leland Bell was as adamant about abstraction in his early years as he was about specific issues in figuration later. Bell was able to worship Arp and Mondrian even after he had begun to paint figure groups, by seeing representation as a complex rhythmic arrangement of forms. However, Bell was perhaps too rigid in not allowing discussions of meaning in his work. The family group was his main subject, and despite Bell’s insistence, has a meaningful, dramatic pull. Robert De Niro also denied some issues of meaning in his work, although we can see his personality and world-view in his subjects – a romantic who was drawn to the crucifixion and portraits of Greta Garbo. De Niro used forceful, evocative, “spontaneous” paint handling to create meaning and drama. Paul Resika also believed in life force and simplified forms—volumes—to evoke the inspiration of nature. A self-described “refusnik,” Resika made an aesthetic journey to the past before he could fully embrace the present. Rosemarie Beck was not a Hofmann student. She was drawn to mythology, classical literature, and its expressive potential. Still, conceiving the picture plane was always her primary concern, and this reflected her early dialogue with Philip Guston and Bradley Walker Tomlin.

Louisa Matthiasdottir’s painting was the vehicle for her authority – the expressive potential and force garnered by removing extraneous detail and investing the subject with

psychological and evocative weight. In marked contrast to Matthiasdottir's personal reticence, was Georges's outrageous form of polemics. The essential piece of his dogma stemmed from Hofmann and was a direct embrace of dialectics: eliminate the static horizon line and combine both upward and downward points-of-view and movements. The freedom achieved was also a metaphor for life.

Nell Blaine's project, too, was about freedom and life force. Overcoming personal obstacles, she cultivated energy from her community and aesthetic/philosophical theory as her work shifted from the bold geometric abstractions of her early years to the late work of still lifes and landscapes – often interior/exterior juxtapositions. So too, did she harness force through symbolic color and light. Albert Kresch, most known for his small landscape paintings, believed in creating space by using just a few color planes. His paintings are as informed by Corot as they are by Mondrian; he found common ground in how such artists use tonal and color contrasts, how the edges of forms meet and create pressure and force.

Matter's paintings of the 1930s included geometric color constructions informed by the example of Cézanne, Cubism, Hofmann and her father, Arthur B. Carles. In synthesizing the lessons of Giacometti, she began a more existentialist lifelong meditation on the still-life. As an educator, Matter was polemical as Bell – but although her ideas differed from his, she hired Bell to teach at the New York Studio School she founded in 1964. She produced generations of students who drew in the manner she espoused – parsing relationships in space between forms with compressed charcoal and erasure. However, she valued *commitment* – to the process, and to aesthetic ideals, even those which did not mirror her own, and her relationships and friendships reflected the

richness and variety of the art world. The art world progressively polarized representation and abstraction. However, the work of the painterly representational artists nevertheless forged a synthesis between nature and abstract principles, and reflects a period in New York when the two modes were more fluidly incorporated into a diverse scene.

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