Beauty & Happiness

by

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> We invariably forget that [beauty and happiness] are individual qualities, and, mentally substituting for them a conventional type at which we arrive by striking a sort of mean among the pleasures we have known, we are left with mere abstract images which are lifeless and insipid because they lack precisely that element of novelty, different from anything we have known, that element which is peculiar to beauty and to happiness.[i]
>
> Marcel Proust

Paintings

My paintings executed in the past three years have explored the shifting relationships of popular culture, advertising, and traditional fine art through their use of abstractions and stereotypes. Though old divisions of "high" and "low" art and commercial and fine art continue to crumble, oil painting's history, and the very material itself, places it in the realm of elite culture. Much of my work exploits the assumption that an oil painting is necessarily an Art object. The history of painting is also the history of images. Old paintings and graphic work provide the foundation for composition, pose, iconography, and style that is now found in popular imagery, particularly advertising. It could be said that advertising uses the grammar of art historical images but *transforms* pictures for the demands of commerce. My paintings step into this transformation. I take this commercial imagery, with their original sources in old pictures, and reinsert them into the domain of fine art. I propose a circular movement.

Much of my early paintings featuring contemporary mass-produced figurines and fragments of 19th century academic paintings provide the foundation for my later work. The early paintings were partly created to attract the viewer's attention immediately by their bright colors and droll imagery. On another level, I wanted to comment - with humor - on the similarities of the inherited tradition of high culture and contemporary popular culture, the techniques by which they both reduce complex personalities to idealized and stereotyped visual conventions. There is a thread running throughout the history of painting that looks for stock types and abstract qualities-the ideal, the grotesque, etc. – that can be inserted into pictures for effect. Today the realm of cartoons and collectible figurines echo these conventions.

Garden oil on canvas 67" x 51" 2004

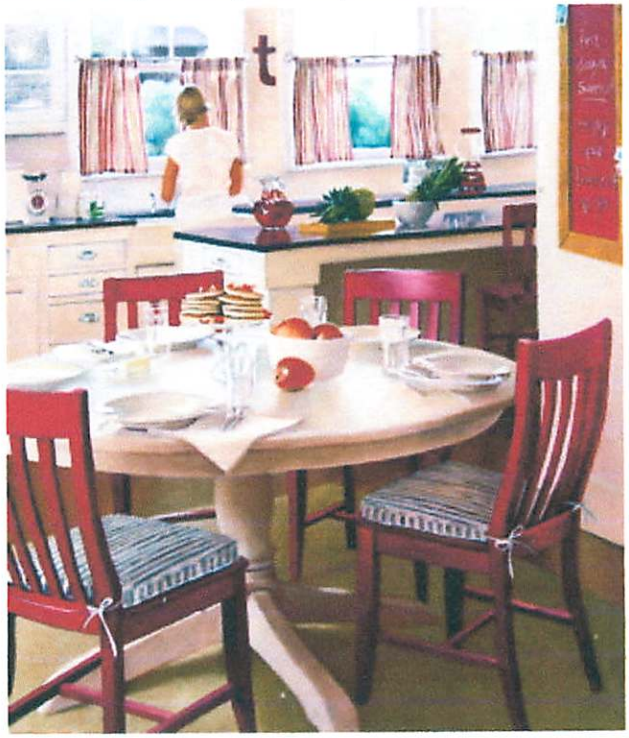
For these paintings, I used photographs I took as well as color reproductions and postcards as source material, which I then "collaged" and improvised on the canvas. I chose particular figurines and imagery that stereotyped personality, gender, and subculture, grafting them on to a background of lurid patterns or landscape, in order to associate the softly painted flesh in Bouguereau's 19th Century academic Venus's with

Technigoth oil on canvas 26" x 30" 2004

the satin-plastic surfaces - the skin - of 21st century figurines. Both of these material surfaces naturally lend themselves to tactile reproduction in oil paint. However, my emphasis was not simply this material connection, but rather that the paintings' material/tactile properties are analogous to their content - the exhilarating spectacle of "flesh." Both the "legs" fragment from the Bouguereau painting (and by extension the woman-as-Venus) and the plastic figurines reduce individuals to essential, eternal, mythologized elements that are meant to stimulate in one case a male spectator and, in another, the consumer. *Garden* and *Technigoth* are demonstrative examples from this series.

For my next body of work, inspired by Warhol's Brillo Boxes, I attempted to make paintings that I felt might not necessarily be initially recognized as works of art. I created oil paintings that were close to exact simulations, especially when rephotographed, of catalogue pages from home furnishings stores such as Pottery Barn and West Elm. In the beginning of the project, I desired a kind of degree-zero translation of the printed matter into the traditional materials and techniques of oil painting. At first glance, I wanted the viewer to be deceived into thinking these were actual catalogue pages hanging on the wall, to marvel at the "found" beauty of these images, which then s/he realizes are really created to urge the consumer to buy the objects depicted. At this moment of disgust at the highly seductive quality of consumerism, I wanted the viewer to then feel redeemed by her/his initial reaction because they are in fact oil paintings, hence art, therefore "good." *Pottery Barn Kitchen* is an example from this series.

This project was partly a failure for me conceptually. One of the major drawbacks to the paintings (which I should have anticipated) was that even though they were small, the paintings were much too large to be mistaken for real catalogue pages. Also, they were on canvas support, which added a substantial bulk to the object, whereas a page of printed material is very thin and ephemeral. A more significant shortcoming of the project was that one can never plan how people will react to



Pottery Barn Kitchen oil on canvas 30" x 26" 2004

images. This is in fact good since it allows for multiple interpretations, gives pictures life, and keeps images from ultimately becoming tools of domination. However, it confused the narrow parameters of my project and resulted in paintings that were mediocre – too large to deceive, even with the catalogue text incorporated, too small to transform the image into an object of greater interest than its source.

However, certain qualities emerged that were surprising, which led me towards my next and latest series. First, I realized the mesmerizing transformation of printed matter - carefully arranged and lit objects and scenes - into oil paint. The aesthetic qualities could be further enhanced by greatly enlarging the images to life-size or larger and carefully building up layers of paint. Another quality was the immediate associations of these images with art and images from the past. I became aware of the little rooms pictured in the Pottery Barn catalogues as being reminiscent of Vermeer paintings, the paintings of objects as traditional still life, and the modern design of the West Elm catalogue recalling Mondrian. Of course the images I selected to paint reflected my personal inclinations; I began to feel that I could act as someone who chooses what to paint and this determination could be important in itself.

A text which I rediscovered recently and I feel is pertinent in regard to much of my work is John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*. Berger suggests that paintings should be read for more than simply their formal qualities; they are signs that have social significance. For instance, historically oil paintings are image-objects that allow a spectator to visually "own" their subjects. "Oil painting, before it was anything else, was a celebration of private property. As an art-form it derived from the principle that *you are what you have.*"[ii] He then forms a relationship between the history of oil painting and contemporary publicity images. Both kinds of images create a lack, envy.

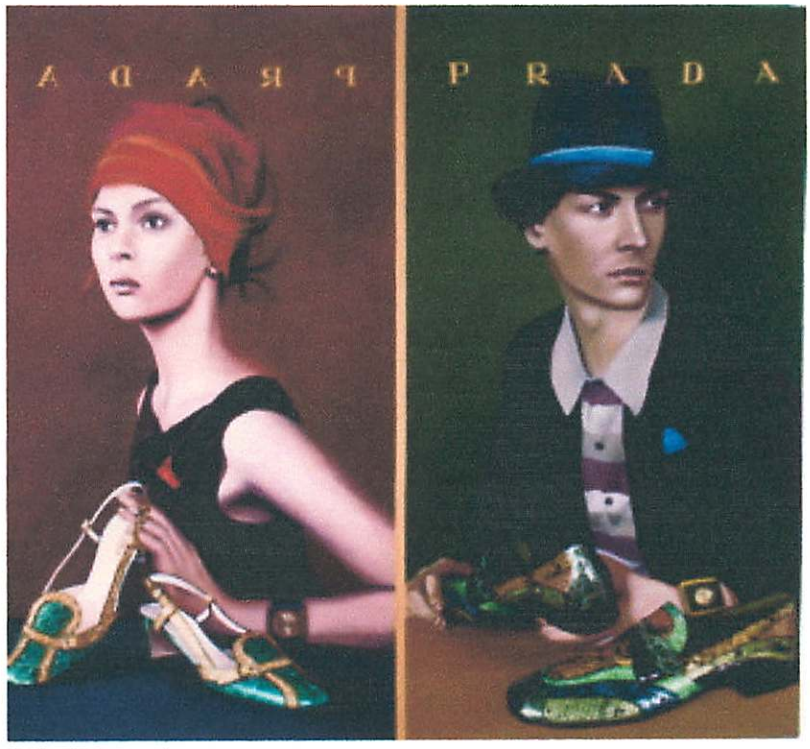
> The power of the glamorous resides in their supposed happiness: the power of the bureaucrat in his supposed authority. It is this which explains the absent, unfocused look of so many glamour images. They look out *over* the looks of envy which sustain them.
>
> The spectator-buyer is meant to envy herself as she will become if she buys the product. She is meant to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others, an envy which will then justify her loving herself.[iii]

Anthropology oil on canvas 60" x 54" 2006

Publicity uses the history of art, and specifically that of oil painting, to lend authority to the products for sale, and it also borrows the language of painting - poses, compositions, material arrangements, etc. This book profoundly informed the thought behind much of my work.

For my latest series of paintings, I decided to "dumbly" reproduce advertisements and catalogue imagery in oil paint with little or no editing; however, I was more conscientious in selecting source imagery. The images

I chose to reproduce either have a thematic content explicitly derivative of art historical imagery or have potential to suggest multiple content on various levels. In addition, unlike the "interiors," these paintings are much larger than their sources. Paintings such as *Anthropology* are lifted with little editing save enlargement, from the pages of an Anthropologie catalog but can be read at first glance as a traditional portrait (I selected this image in particular for its derivation from Picasso's *Portrait of Olga*, a picture of the artist's wife in a patterned chair). This first impression is then complicated by the facture of the panting, the horizontally "wiped" surface negating the traditional modeling of form and its various notational registers: parts are photorealistic, sections are heavily scumbled and "worked," and others are carefully painted in delicate layers. The original catalogue text is screenprinted over the painting enhancing the distance, "breaking the spell," between the viewer and the model in the image.



AdarpPrada oil on canvas 65.5" x 72" 2005

AdarpPrada derives from the tradition of Renaissance portraiture. The male and female images were taken from a Prada advertising campaign but make reference to the Northern Renaissance portrait tradition, which favors the three-quarter profile, a ledge device receding from the bottom of the picture plane enhancing the spatial realism, and the display of husband and wife with their opulent possessions. There is an additional overtone of Adam and Eve imagery (think of Dürer's engraving *The Fall of Man (Adam and Eve)*), but in this contemporary version the figures are turned away from each other (the image of the female is reversed from the ad). The serpent has reappeared but this time as a commodity - reptile-skin shoes. In *AdarpPrada*, the enlargement of the figures to greater-than-life size also enhance the peculiar "lifeless and insipid" quality of the models, who, because of their scale and washed-out tones seem even more vacant and artificial, drained of personality for the role they perform in our consumer culture.

These paintings involve the viewer in a circular process as the reading of the painting moves from engagement with the subject - the figures or objects - that is confused by a style which acknowledges the artifice of the image's source. The viewer also confronts the text, which reaffirms the images' consumer sources. This process is conflated with

the fact of the work being found in an art gallery or museum. The viewer is continually led through a process of attraction and repulsion that exploits their expectations and preconceived notions of the meaning and role of a work of art. A few of these expectations could be as follows:

- What is a work of Art? Much of my work resembles still-life, portraits, and genre scenes; these conventions, the viewer recognizes and realizes the painting to be a work of art. Yet, when confronted with the text and other clues, the painting is recognized as an advertisement.
- What is an artist? Can I be considered an artist because I have selected this particular imagery for reproduction? Does my painted reproduction transcend the source material, transforming it from advertising to art? Or, am I simply a craftsman? These paintings are made not by an "author," but by someone who chooses.
- Is art separate from the world of fashion and commerce? Advertisements for haute couture in a museum, analogous to the Versace ads in Artforum, seem to mirror the artists that the public recognizes for their name brand work. Is art simply fashion instead of a gateway to a transcendent realm of truth and ideals?

The subject of these paintings is in effect artifice and abstraction. Like figurines that portray stereotypes or the interior paintings, which create "proper" visual models for consumption, the imagery of models, clothing, and objects produce abstractions of lifestyle. In the original advertisements, all details of pose, setting, and "personality" are highly contrived to make the consumer want to emulate the lifestyle depicted and buy the products for sale. My paintings suggest that these images can be viewed without that need to "sell" the product, as works of art that can be intellectually engaging in themselves. The artificial conventions used in making the original consumer images "work" are to be found throughout the history of fine art. By selecting these "fake" images as sources to paint, I cite this history and suggest alternative readings of the consumer source images as works of art,

Drawings

My drawings are perhaps the antithesis of my paintings in that, for the most part, I am familiar with the individuals I draw, and I have made an effort to eliminate representational conventions as much as possible. Most of my drawings from the last two years either use, or refer to, the camera lucida (a few were created by projected photographs to simulate the effect of the camera lucida). The camera lucida is an optical aid for drawing that came into vogue in the early nineteenth century and faded from popularity soon after the public announcement of the first photographic discoveries in 1839. The device was something of a "do-it-yourself" tool, an expedient to accurate drawing for those untrained in the practice and a way for educated individuals to both privately and objectively record loved ones likenesses and communicate their impressions of the visible world around them.

David Hockney, a contemporary artist and scholar, suggests that (monofocal) lens devices have been used by artists as diverse as Caravaggio, Holbein, and Ingres to

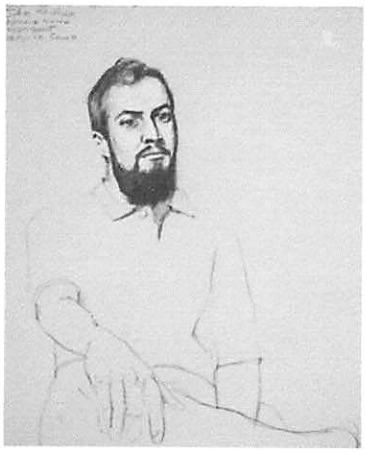
project "reality" onto their canvas or paper, producing an image with characteristics similar to a modern camera. The camera lucida was one of these monofocal lens tools, producing a private visual experience for the observer looking through its lens. Fred Dubery and John Willats have this to say about it in their book *Drawing Systems*:

> The camera lucida achieves similar results to the camera Obscura and has the advantage of being readily portable. The most important component is a four-sided prism, to which is attached a sighting device...Between the prism and the paper there is a lens which helps to bring the object and the paper on to the same apparent plane. [By properly adjusting the lenses], the observer can see a deflected image of the view in front of him, apparently lying on the paper, at the same time seeing the tip of his pencil on the paper well enough to copy the apparent image.[iv]

As a 2004-2005 Center for the Humanities and the Arts (UGA) grant recipient, I was awarded the funds to purchase a camera lucida and began documentary portraits of students and faculty from UGA. The grant allowed me not only to obtain the device but also to pay people for their time. The subsequent portrait drawings combined the accuracy of a photographic process with the richness of the artist's "hand" and time spent with an individual. The project spilled over the length of the grant and I have accumulated well over 100 drawings of friends, family, and colleagues.

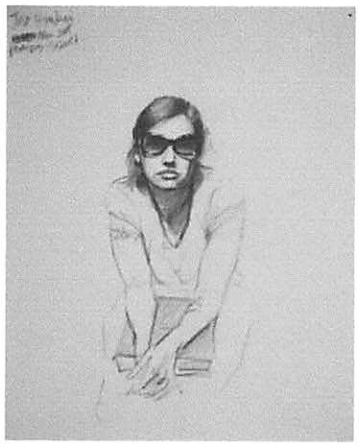
Several features make these portrait drawings distinctive. Because of the innate properties of the camera lucida, the drawings are small scale - approximately 12" x 9" - intimate, and ephemeral. I only use the device for a few minutes in order to quickly "fix" the main features of the subject; one of the drawbacks of the camera lucida is that, since the latent image is seen by partial reflection, once one begins shading, the reflection becomes difficult to see. After the initial use of the device, I spend around 45 minutes developing and finishing the drawing in graphite and white acrylic paint, utilizing the inherent tonality and color of the paper. The portraits resemble the sitters to varying degrees but maintain an intimacy in their scale and characterization of the sitters. My models for these drawings are of course the portrait drawings of Ingres, who Hockney suggests used the camera lucida, and Hans Holbein.

This process is attractive to me for a few reasons. Fundamentally, it uses optics to engage with light as it reveals form, which is for me the primary phenomenon of painting and drawing. Secondly, I appreciate the structure the device imposes on me as a draughtsman, binding optical truth with my interpretation of the subject. Related to this feature is the lens's historical claim to visual truth, which I attempt to exploit by including in my body of drawings projected photographs of celebrities and models who of course did not sit for me. The drawings are presented together - a singular work - a body of "visual research" that plays with the notion of collected truths. Below are three drawings from this series.



John Stidham graphite/acrylic on paper 12" x 9" 2006

Danielle Benson graphite/acrylic on paper 12" x 9" 2005



Jen Bandini graphite/acrylic on paper 12" x 9" 2005

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[i] [i] Proust, Marcel, *Within a Budding Grove, Remembrance of Things Past vl. 2* (New York: T. Seltzer, 1924) 318.

[ii] Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing* (London, British Broadcasting Network; Harmonsworth Penguin, 1972) 139.

[iii] Berger 134-135.

[iv] Dubery, Fred and John Willats, *Drawing Systems* (New York: Van Nostren Reinhold, 1972).