

George Hofmann, *Painting Life*, 2011

This must start a ways back: I was introduced to the great world of art in high school in the middle to late 1950's: at the High School of Music and Art in New York, we had teachers who actually were practicing artists in New York, and they expected us to be conversant with what was going on – so seeing what was happening at the 10th St. galleries was a given. A lot of bad Abstract Expressionist work is mostly my memory. I knew it even then.

Then, in a removal, I went to art school in Germany, starting in 1959. It was a shock in many ways to go from a sophisticated art environment to a desert – everyone of consequence and importance to art had fled Germany, or been killed, and what remained was provincial and arid. In school I was regarded as a freak – my teacher thought my approach was “amusing”. All around me, people were just beginning to see Picasso – I had to remember, often, that it was for the first time – but, on the other hand, there was a pristine quality to the first viewers, and of course, there was History, in a big way, all around.

A German artist pointed out an Olitski painting which had just won the Carnegie International, and, by sheer chance, when I came back to the US, I was hired by

Olitski to teach at C. W. Post College on Long Island. I liked Olitski, I liked his work, and we became friends; when he went off to Bennington College to teach, I often visited him and his family there, driving up from New York with huge cans of Magna paint from Bocour in the back seat of my VW, and Clement Greenberg in the front seat.

This was indeed the great world – but it seemed like a natural one to me, although I was certainly aware of the stature of those around me. I met Ken Noland, at whose house I stayed, I met David Smith, I met Paul Feeley and Vincent Longo and a host of other painters and sculptors – eventually, Anthony Caro, and Isaac Witkin and Phillip King – the whole of the Color Field school and related artists. Professionalism then was everything. It signified commitment and passion in those artists, and this is the world I wanted to live in.

As it happened tho, fired by a new administration at C. W. Post, I eventually ended up getting a job teaching at Hunter College, which was then the seat of Minimalism, where Tony Smith reigned over a coterie of ex-helpers and like minded artists, and Gene Goossen was the genial chair. This was the enemy, in a way – the art world as I knew it was split between the Color Field and the

Minimalist painters and sculptors. The rest were downtown somewhere, doing something insignificant. And I was an odd man out at Hunter, being suspect, because of my associations. Still, I was true to my beliefs, but it was a shock when, after my first big show at French and Co. in 1970 (a terrible show), Nancy Hoffman, who was then director there, left to open her own gallery, and began to showing more commercially oriented work. That was my first realization that something was seriously wrong in the art world; looking back, that all probably had its origins in the early 1960s, but I was removed from it at the time, and anyway, it didn't count for much, even later, in terms of what I thought was important in art.

Altho a lot was being rattled in the 1960s, to pay strict attention to art, this was a period of dislocation for me as an artist; I was friendly with Robert Moskowitz, who had glued a window shade to a canvas and who had shown at Castelli (this was far removed from what I knew) and

even Bob was confused by what was arising in the art world, but being part of the downtown scene, he fit in much better than I did then.

Circumstances led me to do some good work in the 1970s, despite personal difficulties, and by the time of the '80s I was doing work that sold, and was admired. I was asked by a real estate developer, Francis Greenburger, to head a new foundation for under-recognized artists, and I worked hard to establish his credentials in the art world and to put the foundation on a footing that represented the highest levels of the art world: Clement Greenberg and Robert Motherwell were among the judges that first year out (1986), and there was some comfort for me in the fact that recognition, of a sort, of real value in art, was still alive.

Meanwhile, of course, Pop art dominated the scene, and many other movements, however minor, became prominent for a season at a time. I felt more and more an iconoclast as a painter however, and after a horrendous outing as director of Triangle Workshop (Tony Caro's summer camp for art) in 1988, I withdrew to the country. I still taught at Hunter (and that place was demoralized after Tony Smith died), but I felt more and more isolated as an artist in the beliefs that I still held – especially as my roots were in Abstract Expressionism, which, I felt more and more, was under-recognized as the seminal movement of our times, but more importantly, one not completed.

Isolation was a blessing in disguise, as it forced me to face what I really believed in, and what my deepest convictions were. Therapy helped a lot: confronting fears and weird beliefs in life helped me to face fears and weird beliefs in art, and the two eventually became intertwined, in the sense that the one taught me the other. I came to see Abstract Expressionism as a natural

phenomenon – one that, as in nature, could be felled by a lightning strike, or from incomplete growth within. I still believe this. AE emerged from the hard confrontations of people who had been born before electric light – theirs was a pioneering effort, and one that required such a tremendous effort and took such a tremendous toll that, perhaps, it was unsustainable. Real feeling, which was the aim, was very, very hard, and still is.

Real honesty was very hard, and still is.

It was easy to see how Pop could take over – smart-assness can trump real emotion publicly with éclat, and it was much easier to digest for the newly rich who bought paintings not to have to do the hard work of understanding what painters were trying to do.

And: many artists lost their way, or retreated.

At the same time, the great educational effort in the arts produced a certain intellectualism in artists – the artists now were more and more academically trained, and less the “seat of the pants” types (in Bill Rubin’s phrase) who were the mainstays before.

Is it any wonder that these influences conflated, to produce what we have now?

The wonder is that it has lasted so long.

But again, real feeling is difficult - hard for artists and public alike. We have no religion to base it all in, we are swamped by commercialism, and the lack of candor generally itself breeds contempt.

My own position as an artist can therefore said to be that of a Romantic – if by Romantic is meant the Nearly Obliterated, yearning for light; that yearning seems to me the hallmark of those who “emphasize the imagination and emotions”, who value “sensibility and the use of autobiographical material”, who “exalt in the primitive and the common man”, who “appreciate

external nature”, and who have an interest in “the remote”. According to Webster’s. Count me in.

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