

The following is an unpublished letter to Columbia Magazine on the subject of an article (“Natural Light”, by Margaret Moorman, Spring 2007) they ran about Jacob Collins, an artist who paints in a distinctly traditional, academic-realist style, and a series of responses by readers. One reader found the cover, part of a rather restrained painting of a reclining nude woman, indecent (“Anna”, 2004). Some derided Collins for his traditionalism, a few liked his work very much, and some expressed admiration with certain misgivings. One accused the author Moorman of “revisionist duplicities” and the artist (and realists in general) of reactionary and fundamentalist tendencies. I have had my own thoughts on the subject, and I could not leave unchallenged a few things that were said.

My letter itself is essentially as it was in January 2008 when I sent it. Below it there are a few extended footnotes, added subsequently, elaborating themes only touched upon in the letter, as well as links to the issues where the responses appeared, and to a related article.

Link to original article: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Spring2007/brush.html>

Link to the painting: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Spring2007/contents.html>

To the Editors:

Regarding Jacob Collins, it’s encouraging that art can still inspire such lively and extended polemics. Is it too late to join?

The most striking response has certainly been James C. Ward’s. I had a number of responses to his comments, besides incredulity that such a conservative and tasteful approach (*fin troppo*) to the nude figure as Collins’s could still inspire such indignation. At his reference to “a proper place for classical realism”, I asked myself what that place might be: at the bottom of a locked drawer where the kids won’t find it, well-thumbed volumes of Greek statuary along with *Playboy*? I wondered where he got the notion that conflates classical realism with pornography – not at Columbia, I presume. And so on. Then I got it. That was a good one, Mr. Ward, you really had me going for a while!

I applaud Collins’s achievement while recognizing its limitations, as I do with good work in just about any style. I write as an artist whose work recalls older traditions, but who sees his efforts as wholly of our own age. I find not only much to admire in the art of the past or in more traditional styles, but much that inspires me in my own work.

The orthodoxies of classical realism clearly became a straitjacket for many artists during the last century or so, but postmodernism in turn seems to have crowded out more traditional approaches to art making. Too many suppose that older styles have exhausted their possibilities. This is itself mere orthodoxy and betrays a lack of imagination. By now we all should have learned that art is about many things, and that we should hesitate to be too prescriptive about what it should be. Only the artist has any business deciding that.

Joseph Ablow observes courteously that to compete with the past by imitating it would be a limiting business, but it is insufficient to characterize Collins’s work in this way. Collins clearly has his own authentic motivations – quite beyond his admiration for the old masters – for working as he does. Besides, how many artists, even the most innovative, are free of imitation and competition? We work by building on and responding to the efforts of other artists, whether those of centuries ago or of the latest season, hopefully contributing something of our own. To evaluate the work of any artist, we have to look beyond mere stylistic tendencies.

To do a portrait, landscape, or still life is not in itself imitative if the artist is moved by his or her own interest in that subject and brings something worthwhile to it in the interpretation. Originality should not be seen solely as “new” in Pound’s sense, but rather as the product of an authentic approach. In today’s art world there is a mania for originality, and a great deal of highly idiosyncratic work with little depth or substance.

Yulia Fishkin rudely accuses Collins of mindlessly replicating life. That would be an

enterprise of little interest, it's true, but Collins is anything but mindless. She criticizes him for disregarding the 20th century art historical discourse without explaining why everything prior to that is of no interest to her. (Who is the ostrich now?) The dialectic of art is as old as civilization, and there are classic themes that will never be exhausted.¹

I was also surprised by her assertion that “neoclassical training is lesson number one at any art school”. A few semesters of working from life, after which students are turned loose to be creative in any way they can, hardly constitutes neoclassical training. Unless there has been a reaction (towards academic realism) in the training of fine artists in recent decades which has somehow escaped my notice, the institutions which offer serious neoclassical training are few.²

Gregory Cowles warns Collins, based on the experience of his great-grandfather, once but no longer well-known, to beware of “retreading history”, to avoid ending up there (in its dustbin, effectively, he implies), and is kinder than some other respondents. But he confuses artistic success with long-term recognition in art history.

Artists make choices, big and small. A strategic one is whether to adopt styles and practices that will favor success in the art market, or to listen to one's muse and do what is personally valid, limiting the career moves, hopefully, to those that don't involve artistic compromise. To do the former may be a recipe for success in other fields, but not where creativity is paramount.

Perhaps in 100 years no one will know who Collins was except his descendants and a few specialists. But Collins's work will be worth what it is worth – and I do not refer to prices – regardless of whether he remains well-known or becomes just another footnote. Can it be that our worship of Success has so infected our sense of artistic value that we cannot judge a work without reference to fame, historical influence, or auction prices?

I enjoy Tobias Mostel's joke about delivering Columbia Magazine in a plain brown wrapper (his answer to James C. Ward), but some of his remarks, more than anyone else's, need to be disputed. He charges Moorman with a lack of nuance, but lacks it himself. His epithet “revisionist duplicities” is regrettable. Besides his offensive tone, he gets quite wrong a few things about the history of art.

He is plainly mistaken that to paint in a realist style is not a step outside the art establishment, at least if we refer to the highest levels of artistic activity since about 1950. Since that time realism has only been dominant in some regional art and the work of dilettantes, who may have little idea of what contemporary art is about, and who see today's art establishment (with some reason) as a bastion of elitism where their earnest efforts go unappreciated.

He takes issue with Moorman's phrase “radical social realism” referred to Alice Neel's W.P.A. work (see link below). He is correct that social realism was conservative, but only if we are referring to style (representational) as opposed to ideology (progressive or socialistic). This is obvious. An ideologically conservative social realism would have given us murals extolling the brave and wise leadership of the capitalist class.

It may be that abstract art was feared by some American realists and associated with Communism (with little reason, considering that it was feared by communist governments as well), but social realism was not simply a reaction to this. It had its own reasons for being, apart from whatever its practitioners felt about abstractionism. Besides its intrinsic appeal to independent artists, social realism in the U.S. was a function of how the state, relying on its artists, hoped to confront the results of an unregulated capitalism, indifferent to the fates of ordinary people. Such work was to inform, unite, and motivate the public. As modern art it had inherent limitations, concerned as it was with social struggle as opposed to esthetics or interior consciousness. But besides being glad to do their work and make a living, most of the artists involved had, unsurprisingly, decidedly leftist sympathies.

In referring to strains (or stains, as he tars them) of realism and fundamentalism in American art, religion, and politics, Mostel generalizes far too much, as if a work of art were at once a political manifesto and a sermon. To evaluate a multidimensional creation, he would

apply a litmus test. A work of art, whether realistic or not, only rarely reveals itself to be of any particular political or religious persuasion. (When it does, it often tends toward propaganda or preaching.) Such considerations may have nothing to do with the work. We can infer such persuasions, if they matter, only by historical context, or better yet, by knowing what artists actually believed, whether intimately related to their work, or quite irrelevant to it.

As for Mostel's list of progressive developments, I'm with him for most of it (although I don't know what Lenin is doing there, who – besides having given socialism a bad name – would have scoffed at the notion of peaceful coexistence, like our present-day neocons). But Mostel is rather manichaeic in his urge to equate realism with fundamentalism. There may be American realists who fear Darwin and the rest, but such attitudes are by no means necessary. Realism, like reality, is far more nuanced than that.³

I close with the words of Jean Cocteau: "Whatever they criticize you for, cultivate. It is you."

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Torino, Italy
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¹ Neither would it be interesting to mindlessly replicate theory, which is what many contemporary artists seem to be doing. The whole artistic project of the last century alone is so vast that one artist can hardly be more than superficially acquainted with most of it. Each of us has to pick and choose, to decide what is interesting and useful. All of the history of art is eligible, from cave paintings to Van Gogh to today's paper – let's not declare anything "beyond the pale".

In allowing as much in her canon as the entire 20th century, Ms. Fishkin is perhaps more ecumenical than many artists or critics of the last few decades. Even a great deal of 20th century modernism is now seen as passé, irrelevant to current artistic concerns, and no longer of any interest beyond the purely historical. It is presumed even that the great inventions of early modernism have exhausted their possibilities, to say nothing of the works of earlier times.

I have seen the work of the three artists Ms. Fishkin mentions, and they are all worthy in their own ways, and very fortunate to have the recognition they have so early in their careers. However, they don't begin to suggest the gamut or the limits of what kind of work is worthwhile. In the dialectic of art one no one has the last word.

² There may well be renewed interest in the old ways of working (or at least the old ways of learning and preparing to be an artist), but I don't think we need to worry that a wave of artistic reaction is about to overwhelm the art world anytime soon. Art instruction is affected by trends in style – artists are hired to teach largely on the basis of their success in the system, and they tend to teach what they know and what interests them, which tends to reinforce current fashion.

Years ago (as an adjunct professor in the C.U.N.Y., always looking for a full-time position) I was a member of the College Art Association, and regularly received the C.A.A. Bulletin, with postings of teaching positions open. I was disheartened to see there the large numbers of openings in trendy new fields like video compared to more traditional fields like painting, graphics, and even photography. For openings in Art History there was strong interest in candidates up on the latest in critical theory.

There are mature artists who work in a much freer manner than classical realists do, but whose preparation has been (at least in part, or to a degree rare today) traditionally academic, whose freedom is built upon a foundation of skills in representation, gesture, and vision, and whose works possess a rigor that would have been lacking without the discipline they assumed early in their careers. This has been true since the dawn of modernism in art, when most

training was still classical, but the more adventurous artists went ahead to explore new possibilities in responding to the modern experience. But it has been less and less true in the past couple of generations, when the apparent radical freedom of modern artists suggested to many that the old ways of learning to do art were no longer relevant. This was a crucial mistake, and has only limited the artist's repertoire of possibilities. It *seems* it has become much easier to be an artist these days, when in fact it's more difficult than ever to be a really good one.

We would all laugh at the notion of a musician or dancer who was untrained. Many of us think we could act or write without training, but very few are such "naturals" that they could do anything notable without long experience. In the work of a good writer one rarely senses training or technique as such – but one senses their lack immediately in the work of an inexperienced writer. Why do we suppose that one can be an artist without training just because many things can be made without much technical skill? It may work for some, depending on what they do, but certainly not for all. Never mind those who say training spoils the artist's natural abilities. Some artists with classical training claim they had to unlearn everything in order to do work that was new and pure, but in fact they didn't unlearn anything, they just went beyond their training.

Nowadays training in the manual skills of representation are taught far more in programs oriented towards professional illustration than in those for training in fine art. It is a pity that these skills are disappearing, like many other artisanal skills that have served us well for centuries, in favor of skill with computers and programming. Such skills are only (or best) passed on within cultures of tradition, and these are being lost. Still we shouldn't overestimate the difficulty of acquiring the skills of classical realism; only a century ago virtually all artists had such abilities, not only the greatest, but also the middle ranks and vast numbers of forgotten artists and artisans who did everything from architectural decoration to illustration. Many never had a particular personal calling for the profession, but learned the necessary skills just the same.

One of the few exceptions to this trend away from basic representational skills is Mark Tansey, whose extraordinary work combines a realistic monochrome technique with a startling conceptual rigor. Another is William Kentridge, whose striking animations are based on drawing in a rough but traditional way. They are examples of artists who use their training to produce brilliant, original work, unlike the many who do not have recourse to representational methods (except photography, which has its own limitations).

On this subject, let me cite a bit of a song, "Fine Artiste Blues," composed by the cartoonist Robert Crumb for his old group, the Cheap Suit Serenaders.

*"Well, I quit my job, spent six months in bed,
decided I'd take up fine-art painting instead.
Got myself a paintbrush and a bottle of paint,
Five minutes' work is gonna make me a saint.
Baby, I'm a fine ar-teest,
And maybe I deserve to be keest!*

...

*With a white leather jacket and bubble-toed shoes
Got a fifty-thousand-dollar-a-year case of the blues.*

Besides the healthy skepticism he displays, this completely unpretentious cartoon artist invests a degree of skill and expression in his drawings that should be exemplary for fine artists.

I have found my own ways of making art even without classical training, but have regretted this lack at times. When I was about to begin the M.F.A. program, I had to decide between two possible avenues of development: an essentially representational style (but one tending somewhat towards the heightened effects of Vincent Van Gogh, Charles Burchfield, and

Sassetta), or a more stylized, self-taught biomorphism. I chose the latter, abandoning any hope of working in a straight representational style – though I'd have liked to develop some of these ideas – essentially because I knew that I would never be able to draw like Leonardo or apply transparent glazes like the Van Eycks. (I had very high standards.) Fortunately my other ideas didn't require such sophisticated skill, and this is the direction I took. (All the same, in those days when complete freedom was a mantra in art, a little more discipline wouldn't have hurt.) In fact, although my M.F.A. was essentially in painting and printmaking, I was gravitating even then towards photography and photomechanical means of printmaking. Since those days I've been essentially a photographer who thinks like a painter, and whose work is strongly influenced by the history of painting. As such, however, I've always been highly concerned with special techniques and issues of craft, simply to try to push my work – and myself – to their limits.

3 In fact the relation between art and ideology is full of contradictions. A poet as fine as Pound was able to debase himself by espousing fascism and antisemitism. The Italian Futurists responded brilliantly to modern times in their work, but the necessary links from their art to the fascism that most of them also championed are not clear. (Many of their ideas about the new society and the new man would have fit as well with soviet socialism, and partook largely of a naive optimism about the future.) In the earliest years after the Russian revolution, the artists of Constructivism responded to the new society with boldness and enthusiasm. But eventually the state grew impatient with this movement, notwithstanding the loyalty of these artists to the socialist project, and favored (or permitted) only the orthodoxy of socialist realism. The purist, estheticizing, "bourgeois individualist" tendencies of Suprematism were seen as contrary to the interests of the state and tolerated for an even shorter period. Thus some of the most adventurous in modern art the Soviet Union had to offer was stifled.

Socialist realism was a function of the philistinism of a state apparatus naturally suspicious of anything it could not understand. The Party could not imagine that art might have anything else to offer, and there was no room in the new society for anything that was not necessary. The most radical communist society has probably been Mao's China, where, notwithstanding a revolutionary ideology, officially sanctioned art has been extremely conservative stylistically.

Years ago the Metropolitan Museum showed a large group of works from the Soviet Union. It included a large oil portrait of Leonid Brezhnev, a painting utterly without style, imagination, or originality of any kind, a painting whose only good reason for existence might be as an instructive example of the D.O.A. esthetic of most socialist realism. But it must be made clear that the weaknesses of socialist realism, notwithstanding some isolated examples of work that rose above mediocrity, come not from its realism but from the fact that its rules were imposed from above, by cultural officials, and not by the artists themselves. The opposite of this sterile orthodoxy is the healthy pluralism that I favor.

It also included a painting from the 1930's, a dynamic composition portraying two workers, a man and a woman, perched high atop an electrical tower. They were as handsome and healthy as heroic workers always are, but the remarkable thing was the way they smiled at each other: in their expressions there was the unmistakable complicity of sexuality. I found it highly ironic that in the U.S.S.R. they used sex in propaganda just as they do in the capitalist world.

It is no surprise that the Nazis did not tolerate artists like Brecht, Grosz, or Hartman, but they were just as intolerant of artists who, although stylistically radical, were not doing expressly political art. It appears, simply, that formally radical art, even if it possesses no particular political content, represents an intolerable challenge to power where there is a mania for control. Worse still, of course, for work that dares to be expressly political and against the party line. An artist of dissident inclinations can avoid politics, but then be subject to accusations of elitism or bourgeois estheticism. Fortunate is the artist who is not driven by

nature as well as political conviction to do expressly political work, who can take cover in the ambiguities of the medium without sacrificing integrity, hope to be seen by the regime as no worse than innocuous, and avoid making political statements that could bring arrest, suppression, exile, or ruin. (This goes as well for artists in authoritarian societies where a limited degree of dissent is tolerated. In democratic societies, the price of rocking the boat with political art will not be jail or exile, but there may be unfortunate career consequences for an artist just for being out of fashion.)

It seems to be a habit of institutional power to favor art that is stylistically conservative. In the art of the Church in an age when only the few could read, paintings told stories that everyone could understand (far better than now, when few know enough iconography to understand religious art, even though almost everyone can read.) State-sanctioned art of all sorts of regimes – capitalist, fascist, national socialist, and communist – aims to impart the values of the society, just as religious art imparts the values of the religion. In all cases the art has a popular appeal in being readily understood by ordinary people (as well as by the often philistine elites who promulgate the art), and so some form of realism, broadly defined, is in order. It is very rare for a government to see any value in promoting art which is stylistically over the heads of most people; witness the occasional public outrages over conspicuous cases of publicly-sponsored work that strikes the general public as absurd, such as Richard Serra's Tilted Arc.

This fortunately happens anyway, however, in many countries where there is funding and a bureaucracy (more or less independent, and possibly even intelligent and well-administered) in place to support artists and art institutions. Usually only the worst mossback will object to his tax dollars being spent on a symphony orchestra or ballet company, but if word gets out that public money was spent on an art project that someone found offensive (e.g., the notorious *Piss Christ* by the usually restrained Andres Serrano) or merely difficult, look out.

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Summer 2007 Letters, "One Man's Art", from Ward, Ablow, Fishkin, and Platek:
<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Summer2007/Letters.html>

Todd L. Platek, '79BUS
Joseph Ablow
Yulia Fishkin, '03BC, '06GSAS
James C. Ward, Jr. '74BUS

Fall 2007 Letters, "Canvassing Opinion", from Cowles, Mostel, and others:
<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Fall2007/Letters.html>

Gerald W. Grumet '59CC
Robert Meyerson '66CC
Erik S. Gaul '85CC
Gregory Cowles '00SOA
Tobias Mostel '75GSAS
Janine Beichman '74GSAS

Summer 2007, Margaret Moorman article on Alice Neel:
<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Summer2007/MovingPicture.html>

"Still Life with Critic", interview of Jed Perl by Leon Wieseltier (about Perl's book *New Art City*), in the Summer 2006 issue, an item loosely related to Jacob Collins and the issues brought up in the letters about him. I like Perl's heterodox take on art, whether traditional or contemporary. The link:

www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Summer2006/feature4.html