Art in the mirror : an exhibition
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ART IN THE MIRROR
Art in the Mirror: a Metaphor

Art, in at least one of its traditions, is a mirror reflecting current attitudes, interests, and fashions; the spirit of the times. One of society's interests, if not fashions, in the twentieth century is art. The works in this exhibition reflect art itself, and its place in the world both as a subject and a point of departure.

These works direct questions, insults and homages toward art; they often have an untraditional and witty air about them, from Marcel Duchamp's mustached Mona Lisa to Andy Warhol's silk-screened Mona Lisa as movie star. A good number, perhaps a majority, of artists and critics have been proclaiming art as a religion; but sensitivity and passion have their limits, and so, even, does art. The phrase, "We are all too sensitive," might make a healthy punch line for many of the tales told about art.

Comedy, one hears, survives less well than tragedy, although it may be as profound; comedy is usually tied to its own time. We often worry so much about the future that we have no time for laughter in the present. What will future critics say, we fuss. Yet we must always take chances when betting on the opinions of future critics and historians (we never seem to credit them with fallibility). My neighbor or fellow critic or grandson may not take us seriously, but—what the hell!—once in a while art makes me smile.

All art is to some extent about itself, about form and color and materials. Paul Signac, in 1902, wrote, "The subject is nothing, or at least just one of its parts, no more important than the other elements—color, design, composition." Recently some critics and painters have taken that dictum to extremes where the only permissible "subject" is color or paint. The Jasper Johns and the Robert Indians are in large part about paint and surface, and color and form; their fascination and beauty lie behind the skin and mask of their subject. The Wesselmann drawing surely reveals an artist equipped with technique, and respect for art; but the wisps of smoke which curl before the Renoir (and Redon and Ganzane), artful as they may be, are not without a sense of humor.

The range of artists' attitudes towards the mirror defies the many dogmatists who today claim to define them. This show is a small personal selection; it does not include any work without an image of art, that is, none whose subject is "pure" paint or color or line. Yet the scope of a single painter, Robert Rauschenberg, here encompasses the ironic deKooning Erased (literally exemplifying what artists of the time called a need to erase the past), the beautiful yet amusing Mona Lisa drawing, and the large, even grand, Rauschenberg painting with Rubens' own metaphorical comment on the goddess of beauty and love (contemplating her own image).

Joan Gris literally opens a window in the plane of his Cubist composition. Picasso, Miro, and Hirschfield all rework old master paintings, or just plain old paintings, "modernizing" and rehabilitating them: Picasso even does this with his own work. Art turned inward upon itself (with a touch of hubris!) is a theme of modernism; Robert Morris, presumably with tongue in cheek, used as his theme an illustration of the very box which holds the photograph. Paul Thek's work, one of the least charming in the show, makes explicit the terror of Warhol's artistically "empty" Brillo box; but its limp tube (the box a scatological black humor. (The box itself is the design of the late James Harvey, an action painter who also worked as a commercial artist.)

Life is full of peculiarities and contradictions. Pop art, which first seemed a realistic relief, is slowly revealing itself as a return to metaphor. If the sledge hammer sound of its images penetrates our consciousness, it then continues to reverberate with increasing subtlety.

Several centuries passed before the Mona Lisa became a symbol of mass culture and boredom. Today the mass media, museums without walls, and a bourgeois awe of artists have a similar abrasive effect after only a few months. We must, in other words, take care that the "boredom!" we may feel in the presence of familiar artists and images is not in ourselves and our own careless visual habits. In this sense familiarity is dangerous; it puts us out of focus. A moratorium on photographs, literature about art, even exhibitions might refresh us and make us responsive again. Without it, however, one way to approach art is through the eyes of artists. Rauschenberg may clarify the myth of Leonardo, and Lichtenstein the cliches surrounding Picasso, thereby improving our focus on painting of both the past and the present.

Opinion grows like hot air between us and the work. The sense of proportion and of humor in most of these works is like a needle—a far more dangerous instrument to an inflated balloon than is a baseball bat. The Mona Lisa, if examined with care and love, can still revert to an object of wonder. For me, the mirror of these works helps return art to delight.

G.R.S.


Gris, Juan. Spanish, 1887-1927.

12 Violin and Engraving. 1913. Oil and collage on canvas, 25½ x 19¼. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Bequest of Anna Erickson Levene in memory of her husband, Dr. Phoebus Aaron Theodor Levene.


Indiana, Robert. American, born 1928.

14 To The Bridge (after Joseph Stella). 1964. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 70 x 60. Lent by Mrs. Walter Landauer, Toronto.


17 Canvas. 1956. Encaustic, wood and collage on canvas, 30 x 25%. Lent by the artist.


Magritte, René. Belgian, born 1898.


Miro, Joan. Spanish, born 1893.

24 Personage in the Night. 1944. Oil on canvas, 6½ x 9¾. Private Collection.


25 Box with Photo of Door. 1963. Wood construction with photographs, 15½ x 11¼ x 2¼. Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles.


Picasso, Pablo. Spanish, born 1881.


Raffaele, Joe. American, born 1933.


30 Erased deKooning Drawing. (1953). Eraser, 11¾ x 15½. Lent by the artist.


Thek, Paul. American, born 1933.


39 Violin with Numbers. 1962. Oil on canvas, 54¼ x 72¼. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, Meriden, Connecticut.


Tom Wesselmann: Drawing for “Great American Nude #50”. (1963)

The exhibition was selected by G. R. Swenson. 1966