The New Criterion

Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

The art world has traded the name of William Bailey as a hushed code word for thirty years. A code word for what? Well, for the legitimacy of painting, for realism, for the return of the nude, for an indifference to the art of the moment. A professor and dean in fine arts at Yale, one who spends part of each year in Umbria, Bailey is that rare find in the criticism of modern art: a *test case.*

To his champions, Bailey has achieved the feat of rendering what is ordinary and known—through the conventional media of oil on canvas and pencil on paper—in ways that are strange and oddly new. To his critics, and this includes most of the art world's trendier lot, he is a hopelessly retrograde realist, a painter of the lowest sort, whose narrow subject matter of young ladies and tables of crockery is a passive-aggressive assault on the legacy of the avant-garde.

Yet the frustration that Bailey has posed to art's (now) establishment tastes in the avant-garde would have little purchase were it not for his work's remarkable—and really unexplainable I have to say—visual presence and formulation. A recent exhibition at Robert Miller Gallery testifies to the fact that this painter deserves a chapter of his own in the history of modernism.[1]

In his meditations on the themes of still life and nude, Bailey draws from an inheritance of Ingres and Gérôme, but also from the Renaissance modeling of form, a monastic, earthtoned palette, a hint of Greuze's "erotic prudery," and an air of genuine surreal strangeness—de Chirico-esque. More than the sum of their parts, timeless more than

timely, Bailey's paintings *do* test your understanding of what is acceptable for modern art—yes, and that's a very good thing. His work is a feast for the eyes, albeit a low cholesterol one. You leave in need of a second helping.

Many painters are called "masters of light," but Bailey is something else: a master of tone. His still life paintings that lined the main gallery at Robert Miller—a varying combination of bottles, jugs, pitchers, kettles, funnels, and eggs with evocative titles like *Monte Rotondo* (2001), *Migianella Monumentale* (2002), and *Terranuova* (2002)—are drawn in that half-light of a shaded room. The effect undermines color but, through the absence of light's bright reflection, can elucidate shape. Free of imperfections, these shapes are what some critics have called "ideas" and others "ideal," and their message communicates a placid, Apollonian harmony—a harmony of the spheres, maybe? While the crockery and eggs are objects from the real world, there is no indication that they have remained here; the dark spaces above them hang like sepulchral shade. Whether these vessels now contain anything, or contained something at one time, or have any kind of history whatsoever we are never told. There is a strange timelessness and weightlessness to them, a tapping into some forgotten notion, volumes without mass that levitate above the table surfaces just enough for us to sense it without really seeing it. Perhaps this hints at the power of Bailey's still lifes—we get out of them what *we* bring to the table.

The combination of these still lifes alongside paintings of Bailey's other major theme, the nude, made for good dialogue at Robert Miller. Bailey's nudes resemble his idealized still lives in certain ways—the soft handling of tone across the arc of the skin, the lack of definition. In the east gallery room, where a series of tempera and charcoal drafts hung beside the finished nude of *Imaginary Studio* (2002), one could see the smoothing out of uniqueness in the face and the straightening of curls through Bailey's works-in-process. The message these nudes convey is not one of sexiness in the guise of an odalisque, or the morning-after shame one finds in Whistler, or the prurient infantilization of a Balthus. Yet there is not a sense of complete propriety or purposefulness in our gaze, either. In the eggs and vessels of his still lives and wombs of these nudes, Bailey extends the possibility of reproduction if not an explicit image of reproduction itself. Reproduction of what? Of some unknown history. Of the painterly past, maybe, in the eggs (tempera) and funnels (oils) of those still lives.

Bailey's paintings seem pretty pacific, yes. So it must be a sign of the times in intellectual culture that *The New Yorker* chooses to hurl as much venom as it did in its recent blurb:

> Many hermetic still-lifes, plus vaguely Balthusian nudes of young women, by the arch-conservative realist, whose changeless style is an earnest of metaphysical conviction and/or paralysis. He renders shelves and tabletops of old-fashioned ceramic and metal vessels with slightly fuzzed precision in finely adjusted grays and earthen colors with decorative blue accents. Bailey's obsessively scrutinized vessels have more sensuous presence—sexiness, even —than his phlegmatic nudes, which isn't to say that they

> have much. Time stands still. Calendar art for people who don't care what year it is.

Subtlety is not for everyone, and a subtle painter can be the most infuriating thing of all.

Subtle the painter Paul Georges was not. Through his life he struggled to paint the world bigger, brighter, and crazier: bigger canvases, larger studios, louder colors, broader brushstrokes, wilder images. The show "Paul Georges: Last Paintings" at Salander-O'Reilly is so titled not only because this artist, with a big appetite for life, died in May 2002, but also because he called his last body of work "My Posthumous Series."[2] By some premonition or foresight, Georges knew his clock was running out. His final series, big and hastily executed, with one canvas so large it would not fit in the Salander gallery space, depicts a host of heavenly creatures gazing in at the artist through the skylight of his studio. And these creatures *are* heavenly: flesh-and-blood nudes floating down from that studio in the sky. The effect is touching—and it raises that question of art's age-old theme: immortality. For in his final year Georges was building both a bridge into the afterlife of his soul as well as the afterlife of his artistic reputation. These paintings were his Giza.

In life Georges was part of a circle of New York painters, including Fairfield Porter, Leland Bell, Paul Resika, and Robert De Niro, that often matched a renewed interest in the figure with a Fauvist sensitivity to color and light. Georges's best works in "Last Paintings" are those where he has sublimated gesture for the clashing effects of broad fields of color. *Painting in the Studio* (2001), where the artist stands by an open window awash in cadmium yellow, best captured this effect. At other moments, however, Georges cannot quite deliver. His figures are often cruder than they are bold, as in *Muses Dancing in Volcano Shadow* (2001), and, like many painters, he never seemed to get a lock on the face. He did better where color and light were able to shine forth, such as in the lush and sun-drenched *Rose Arbor* (2001) and the liquid *Still Life in Landscape* (2002–2002).

Death can be a good career move, but it's not always convenient to stick around to enjoy it. Like those eavesdropping seraphim, let's hope that Georges managed to drop in from time to time on his own achievement.

This might be a good moment to plug the Marsden Hartley survey show at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, which I reviewed here last month. There are still twenty days in April in which to catch it. Now a gallery in New York has opened a show—devoted to a small period in Hartley's output—that contributes a still richer view of this difficult, wide ranging, and truly wonderful artist.

Marsden Hartley has generally received two critical readings in the history of modernism. One: Hartley's early pictographs painted in Berlin at the outbreak of the First World War—through their use of all-over abstraction—were his most significant contributions to twentieth-century art. Two: Hartley's figural work from the 1930s and 1940s, up to the time of his death in 1943, was equal if not surpassing of his great Berlin achievements three decades before. As all-over abstraction looks more like ancient history, it would

seem that the second assessment deserves renewed priority (this is the position I argued for in last month's review). What both of these histories overlook, however, in Hartley's achievement in landscape paintings in the 1920s, which is often seen as a Cézannean and Fauvist retreat from his losses in the Great War and from his potential for boldness and newness.

"Marsden Hartley: New Mexico 1918– 1920," a gem of a show now at Alexandre Gallery, proves that Hartley can always surprise.[3] His molten hills and purple crags rank among the most remarkable depictions of landscape one can find. *Landscape, New Mexico* (1919–1920), on loan from the Whitney Museum, is a masterpiece. What becomes apparent as Hartley paints in series is the astonishing variety of his output. His *New Mexico Landscape* (1919) from the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum is abbreviated Cézanne; a painting of the same title from a private collection is upended Derain. These are not paintings executed through a system, but rather a reflection of something chthonic, something primitive. The catalogue includes a very worthwhile essay from Gail R. Scott, which puts much of this intense period in perspective: Since Hartley did not drive, he often went into the landscape on foot, camping out for extended periods of time, executing, he claimed, a pastel a day. In addition to Scott's contribution, the catalogue includes two essays written by the artist himself for *El Palacio*, the magazine of the Museum of New Mexico, both originally published in December 1918. These essays confirm Hartley's metaphysical intensity:

> Genuineness, authenticity, are qualities we demand of ancient objects and pictures in the museums of art anywhere in the world. We despise spuriousness in art, and very legitimately, just as we despise all forms of fakery that hint at genuineness. We have a right then to expect the same characteristics in a modern painting, authenticity of emotion.

Can there be any doubt that Marsden Hartley remains an underrated genius in twentieth-century art?

The painter Wayne Thiebaud has earned *his* footnote in the survey books of twentieth-century art for his still lifes of squishy cupcakes, pies, and other devildog treats from the 1960s. His work from this period matched a rather traditional paint application, sticky and sweet, with the new idioms of Pop—serialism and kitsch under the influence of Madison Avenue and the roadside billboard. Now in his eighties, Thiebaud has been associated with the pop movement ever since his early snacks, even though he has not been its strictest hard-liner, and his catalogue has come to include a broader sweep of modern life—amped-up cityscapes of San Francisco, for example.

On view at Allen Stone Gallery in March, Thiebaud's six large landscape paintings, with titles like *River Cloud* and *Fields & Furrows*, all from 2002, were inspired by California farmland. They will undoubtedly be compared to the recent landscape work of another California painter, David Hockney.[4] Both artists have chosen to tweak perspective—multiple vanishing points, uncertain horizon lines—as part of their paintings' architectural framework. Yet while Hockney leaves us with mostly representational scenes in his "Grand Canyon" series, Thiebaud makes funky perspective and composition

the beginning and end of his work. His aerial views of rivers and unworldly farmland are an admixture of checkered patterns, dissolving wheatfields, and faked horizons ornamented here and there with stands of small trees in shadow. The colors are that of old rose cellophane, and one cannot help but see in his red and yellow riverbanks the ketchup and mustard of earlier work. The results are interesting if brainy and hyperactive, trying a little too hard to fool, with too much of a reminder of the paintings' pastiche and not enough of a sense of real place. The produce that grows in Thiebaud's fields is a bumper crop of ho-hos and ding-dongs that sprout solely from the Pop artist's mind. This is a pantomime of modern life.

How to describe the difference between the landscapes of Marsden Hartley and Wayne Thiebaud—between the divergent impressions these two painters leave in your mind? It can make for an interesting exercise. One answer might be the contest between Thiebaud's abstraction and Hartley's "empathy"—what Wilhelm Worringer characterized as the aesthetic engagement of a "contemplating subject."

In his 1979 book *Symbolism*, the art historian Robert Goldwater identified a similar, albeit separate, tension in the art of 1890s—between the public art of *art nouveau* and the private art of Symbolism:

> The symbolist style has an energy and simplicity which, though difficult to define, is recognizable and recognizably lacking in the more decorative productions of *art nouveau*. This force and intensity, which dictates the tensions between (in Schmutzler's words) "the qualities of material reality, such as perspective, foreshortening, volumes in light and shadow" and the internal order of art, stems ultimately from the symbolist's expressive purpose. For whether or not the artists of the movement worked out a philosophy of idealism, so that they believed they were creating symbols of unseen ideas, or more simply, believed that the properties of line and colour can express emotion, they intended their pictures to have meaning, and this conviction that art conveys personal feeling and/or universal ideas was, of course, of no concern to *art nouveau*.

Is pop art the bastard child of cool *art nouveau*? Maybe. I do sometimes wonder, however, why much art today eschews private meaning to be *so* publicly *nouveau*? Could it be time to reprioritize art's "urge to empathy"? When a Wayne Thiebaud can outprice a Marsden Hartley four-to-one, it's a buyers' market for empathy in art.

Notes

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1. "William Bailey" was on view at Robert Miller Gallery, New York, from February 6 to March 15, 2003. Go back to the text.
2. "Paul Georges: Last Paintings" was on view at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries from March 4 to March 29, 2003. Go back to the text.

3. “Marsden Hartley: New Mexico 1918–1920: An American Discovering America” opened at Alexandre Gallery, New York, on March 6 and remains on view until April 19, 2003. A catalogue of the show has been published by Alexandre Gallery in association with Mark Borghi Fine Art, Inc. Go back to the text.
4. “Wayne Thiebaud: Riverscapes 2002” was on view at Allan Stone Gallery, New York, from February 5 to March 22, 2003, and Paul Thiebaud Gallery, San Francisco, from October 29 to December 21, 2002. The exhibition opens at Faggionato Fine Arts, London, on April 8 and remains on view until May 24, 2003. Go back to the text.

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