HORACIO TORRES AND THE AFFIRMATION OF A MONUMENTAL FIGURATIVE ART

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One of the most puzzling aspects of the current art scene is the resistance to the paintings of Horacio Torres. In many quarters, he has been either ignored or dismissed as not worthy of serious consideration. The rejections have often been vehement. Moreover, these attitudes are sometimes found among those normally sensitive to good pictures and the very people who are most sympathetic to representational painting. This is all the more surprising since Torres, besides being simply our best representational painter at the moment, seems to fulfill those hopes for a new, monumental figurative art voiced so frequently since the early 1950s and before. And if, as some critics have maintained, his works are not relevant, if he is so hopelessly old-fashioned, why can't he at least be appreciated for those qualities that his pictures so obviously possess?

All this is not to say that Torres has gone totally unappreciated. Quite the contrary. Throughout the country, collectors, critics, dealers, and museum curators, independently of each other, have responded enthusiastically to his pictures and recognized him as the fine painter he is. It is largely if not exclusively the New York art "scene" and the representational art establishment which seems to find his pictures unworthy of note.

The main objections have been to his "academicism" and then to his crudeness or rawness, and to his "poor drawing." Whether or not a picture is academic has to be a question of the aesthetic substance, not the mere look, the mere phenomenal appearance. It is a matter of whether there is real freshness of feeling, not whether the idiom initially presents itself as out-of-date. It is also a question of degree. Indeed, the academic does haunt all modern representational art; and the artist's consciousness of this has usually been debilitating. The pictures of Jack Beal, Alex Katz, and Alfred Leslie are examples of what seem like desperate attempts at escaping the academic. By violently imposing conventions drawn from abstract painting onto represented reality, their works fall into a kind of vulgarity. And the same desperation is evident in the Photo Realists, who, in merely enlarging photographic vision, manage to be academic and vulgar simultaneously.

Figure painting has been the most difficult of all genres for modern painting to accommodate. Our humanistic tradition has clothed the human image with so many powerful forms that today it is near impossible to see it freshly. Also, in our modern world, no collectively held concept of man imposes itself, or at least not one capable of visualization. Perhaps even more inhibiting is the formal problem that a modern figure painting presents: it demands that the most conspicuous and psychologically focused of all three-dimensional objects be set against a background, a procedure which directly conflicts with modern flatness and evenness of accent. This is far less true of, say, a landscape or an interior or even a still life. So it was that when the formal implications of modern painting became evident in the 1880s, this consciousness drove virtually all of the leading artists (except Monet) back to figure painting in an effort to save the Western tradition of the easel picture. Renoir, Degas, Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, and even Pissarro turned to the figure and often to the subject of "Bathers," nude figures out-of-doors in an Impressionist landscape. It was at this time, and for the same reasons, that Puvis de Chavannes and Hans von Marées in Germany attacked the problem from a more traditional but still basically modern point of view. It is a measure of the gap between the imperatives of modernism and figure painting that so many of these efforts failed, and that none of them proved overly successful or resulted in a stylistic solution. The latter was achieved by the next generation, the Cubists, only at the price of dissolving the figure completely.

Matisse, who, along with Picasso, was heir to the crisis of the 1880s, was still able to get something radically new out of figure painting. Since then, the development of modernism has belonged pretty much to abstract painting. Here is the area of fresh discovery and innovation and so here is the area where most of the creative energies are invested—and where modern self-consciousness can be avoided. But there is another possibility, an alternate kind of modernism, one more congenial to literature. It is more akin to the approach found in the works of certain masters of modernist writing, Eliot and Joyce, or in

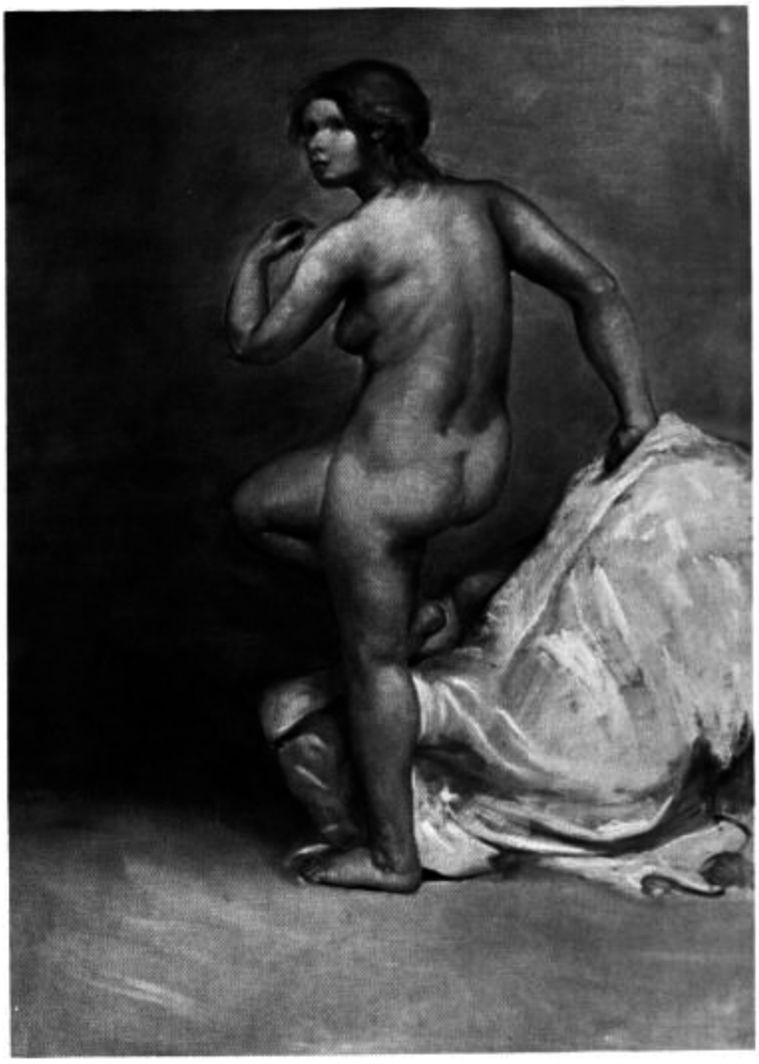
At right: Horacio Torres, Partial Nude on Yellow Damask, 1975. *Oil on linen, 50 x 64". Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery.*
Far right; above: Horacio Torres, Standing Nude on Green Background, 1975. *Oil on linen, 84 x 60". Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery.*
Far right, below: Horacio Torres, Nude and Brown Curtain, 1975. *Oil on linen, 50 x 64". Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery.*

the translations of Pound. The explicit past is set against a self-reflected modernism. This is not mere revivalism, a losing of oneself in the past, a self-forgetting; both the past and the present must be given their due. Content issues less from one or the other than from the relationship between them.

Relatively few modern painters have availed themselves of this path, and when they have, the results have been generally less exalted than those of their literary counterparts. Also, this approach does not amount to portraying modern subject matter in traditional forms, as in the writing of Pasternak or so much painting of the 1930s (for example, that of Grant Wood or Reginald Marsh). This is no more than naive traditionalism. Nor is it only a question of presenting traditional subject matter in modern forms, for example, using the former as a mere occasion or scaffolding to support an essentially abstract intent. Nor is it that ironic presentation of traditional images in an updated style which one finds in Lichtenstein's Pop parodies of older art, or those of John Clem Clarke. These painters rob the past of what is most intrinsic to it, while at the same time offering only the veneer of modernism.

Rather, with the approach I have in mind, the intent is to evoke the expressive feel, the form *and* content of the older art, but as filtered through and transformed by our historical-psychological distance from it. Acceptance and acknowledgment of alienation becomes a way of overcoming it. Made present through its very pastness, the past reflects our true historical selves yet retains its own identity.

The most notable example of this self-conscious historicism is Picasso's reworking of the classical in the 1920s. At this time, Picasso, rather than seeking to unite the abstract and the figurative, divided himself. The modern aspect present in his figurative works was a literary one—a blank attitude toward and an expression of the subject which he had first hit upon while evolving Cubism. At that time, Iberian sculpture, a degenerate form of the classic, had suggested to Picasso the possibility of exaggerating certain classical conventions in order to blunt the expression. In the 1920s he turned this discovery into something more positive, a deliberate remoteness which bordered on parody. Hence, in addition to that distance which the classical ideal always implies, Picasso was able to include our alienation from it and thereby achieved what so much of the 19th century sought in vain—a convincing neo-classicism. He mimicked not only the classical past but also our feelings about it; for example, how it comes to us filtered through other works of art—the muted testimony of copies, fragments, and bastardizations. Closed off and distanced, this classical world permitted Picasso an equally exaggerated spatial and sculptural realization which, if it courted academicism, did not quite succumb to it.



Torres' work has to be seen in this perspective. His versions of Venetian and Baroque modes are like Picasso's neo-classicism—an evocation not of a specific older image or manner of a single artist, but of a whole feeling world of style. In a sense, the task which Torres has set himself is even more difficult since the past with which he deals is both more historically specific and more emotionally remote. The grand, the decorous, the rhetorical and heroic of Baroque art all seem at the furthest possible remove from modern sensibility and taste. This emotional distance to the illustration means that, even more than with other past styles, it is almost exclusively the form—the composition, the color, and above all the "painterly"—which gives modern sensibility access to Venetian and Baroque art. With a vision shaped by abstract painting, Torres exaggerates these very features.

While Picasso's modernity involved sealing off from us an autonomous classical world, Torres' modernity operates in the opposite way in that it depends primarily on a directness, an immediacy of form and handling. This in turn forces him to compromise the authority of his depicted world, often to fragment its autonomy and break its continuity. As a result his subject matter becomes *the Baroque mode itself.* By means of his distinctly modern abstraction from the form and subject of this mode—and he must abstract from the latter more than the former—he registers our modern distance to the Baroque while making viable a whole range of feelings associated with it.

Both Picasso and Torres make their modern distance aesthetic and explicitly aesthetic. In this they are being true to their time. Today our only common relationship to the past is an aesthetic one and the only legitimate, i.e., fully self-conscious expression of this state of affairs involves the acknowledgment of it. But since, unlike Picasso's, his modern distance is largely pictorial or abstract, Torres' conjunction of past and present has had to be more radical, even violent. So his solutions have had to be equally drastic, rough and even raw, both in his actual painting and also in his extreme croppings and eccentric cuttings. It is remarkable, however, that so many viewers who normally respond to Old Masters' painting have missed the great subtlety and painterly beauty which issues from the rough look (or the aesthetic justness of the often brutal-seeming truncations). As for drawing, it is rather tiresome after all the lessons we have supposedly learned from art history to have to repeat that with this kind of painterly art, drawing is less a question of correctness than of invention, conviction, and *accent;* so, the "errors" of Rubens and Titian. Correct drawing in the academic sense or even in the more decorative Florentine concept of "designo" is not only unnecessary, but undesirable—it would undermine the painterly concept.

The new work of Torres, shown at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in Houston and now in New York, is more assured and sumptuous in its realization. It is also more ambitious, especially the large *Composition With Figures* recently acquired by the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. Thus far Torres' procedure has been to prevent his elements—figures, drapery, background—from constituting a "scene," a separate world, by means of various kinds of incompleteness. What is represented must not be allowed to gain its own autonomy and independence if the work is to achieve its governing modern identity as a painted picture; and because Torres' realization is so full-bodied and complete, his incompleteness must be all the more abrupt. This has become even more explicit in the new picture which is his most ambitious to date and which, for that reason, has prompted him to some new discoveries and a more flexible procedure.

Torres had attempted to combine multiple figures before, both in his earlier chiaroscuro manner and in his recent, more modern idiom. In *Two Nudes Against the Sky* (1972), now in the Rhode Island School of Design, two figures ride loftily on clouds and drapery. Psychological interaction and the consequent illustrational independence is avoided by means of his usual devices of hiding heads with drapery or by cropping the figures at crucial points.

In the new picture, everything is more direct and more real. The figures all occupy something like a ground plane and in general respond more to gravity; they are fully modeled, turn out of profile toward the viewer, occupy several distinct planes, and at one point even overlap each other so as to create an internal pocket of space. Two of the heads are fully rendered and one, the bearded man in front, has a psychological directness hitherto found only in Torres' portraits.

On the other hand, a new kind of indeterminacy and incompleteness, both formal and

At right:
Horacio Torres, Lower Nude Torso on White and Blue Cloth, 1975. *Oil on linen, 50 x 62". Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery.*
Below:
Horacio Torres, Composition with Figures, 1975. *Oil on linen, 69 x 95". Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery.*

psychological, compensates for this new directness at every point. The space is not really clear or continuous and the figures suggest, but do not really constitute, a focused event or common occasion. They remain suspended between a concentrated action and a merely additive arrangement. The central man has both an oblique and a parallel psychological relation to the girl behind and he almost, but not quite, makes eye contact with the viewer. The focus of the picture is still psychological, the two heads in the middle where there is most space and most illustrational meaning, but the triangle they create is not closed either formally or psychologically. Complementing these psychological elisions is the most noticeable new feature, the painting's radical unfinish. The background which Torres has always kept undefined and amorphous is now mere underpainting—or the look of it—and at certain points becomes continuous with the drapery. The standing nude at the extreme left is cropped at the neck while at the right the head of a very beautifully painted reclining figure is simply omitted. Torres has given up finishing his picture throughout and thereby opened up the possibility for more complex spatial and volumetric realization as well as more range of color and handling.

Just as his pictures previously moved from the generalized unspecific background to the more specific drapery and the still more focused and specified object that a figure must be, and just as he could and did vary these in their degrees of specificity from picture to picture, so here he modulates the specific and the general from figure to figure and even within the single figures.

Until now, Torres has found that single figures, when presented as more or less complete, often seem too autonomous and self-contained and consequently undermine the direct, modern character of the picture. Groups of figures as well as individual physiognomies have presented similar problems since internal psychological relationships tend to create the same effect. The new possibilities of internal unfinish and incompleteness as evinced in *Composition with Figures* seem paradoxically to offer new possibilities for achieving more completeness and multi-figure complexity while retaining directness and the primacy of the picture over the scene. Also, the greater modulation of unfinish not only allows more finish and internal autonomy, but also more flexibility in dealing with the abstract. All in all, he has enriched his art considerably. A related feature of Torres' new work is the elimination of dense backgrounds, whether of bright color or heavy paint covering or both, a feature which, while heightening the picture's abstractness, sometimes seemed to compete with the figures.

By making his modern distance primarily formal rather than, as with Picasso, primarily illustrational, Torres has found room to expand his art and to develop it, i.e., he has found a way to pose new problems for his figure painting.