HORACIO TORRES, WITH SOME NOTES ON CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONAL PAINTING

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I

There is a picture by Thomas Cole painted in 1840 that shows the tiny figure of an architect perched high upon a huge column; before him is a vast panorama of architectural possibilities. Egyptian pyramids, Greek and Roman temples, Gothic, Romanesque, and Baroque structures are all spread out for his consideration. Entitled *The Architect's Dream*, the picture is the most perfect conceivable image of that phenomenon we call historicism. The artist finds himself entirely free to choose from the past any style that will serve him. But the price of this freedom is the lack of any received relation to the past and to its continuity and meanings. The architect is isolated and equidistant from all of the idioms of the past; he is equally free to choose any of them, since he is equally alienated from them all. The criterion he must rely upon in choosing one or the other is either personal or abstract—either his own personal feelings and preferences or an abstract sense of appropriateness and function. Hence his relation to tradition is itself unhistorical; it is not given to him by his time, his teachers, his patrons, or the previous generation. It is rather the result of a choice based on his own sensibility and personal preference. He may select Classical or Gothic, but his choice has no authority outside himself and promises no development for others. The quality of his art will depend at least in part on the rightness of his choice, on the way the past style will permit him to realize himself; and in the end the artist's relation to the past is purely aesthetic, and Cole quite properly depicts the architect in a pose of contemplation.

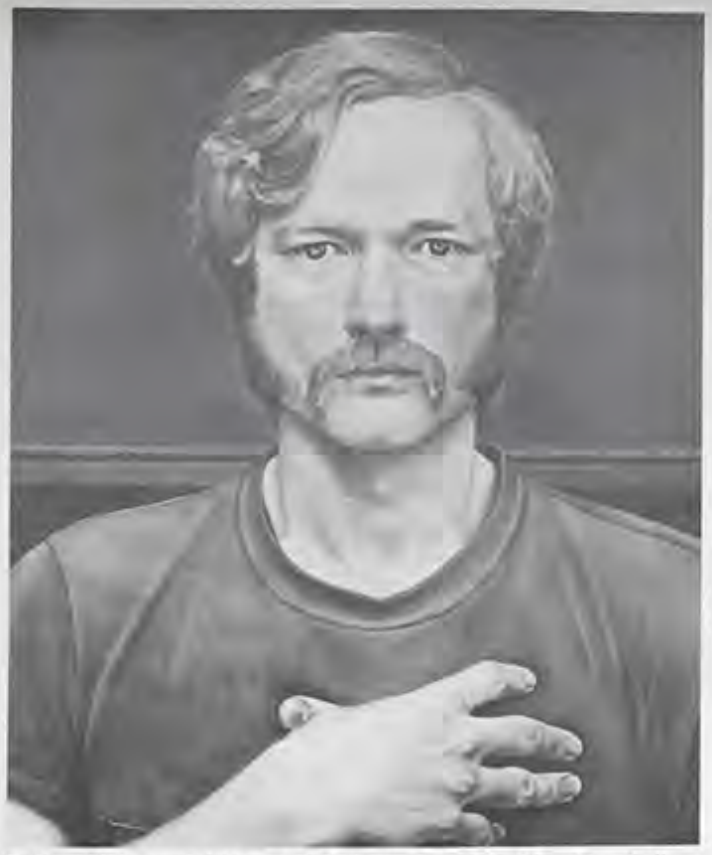
Today, the painter who wishes to work representationally must acutely feel the poignancy of this situation. He is given no guidance in establishing a relation either to reality or to the past. He is given no style in the sense of an authoritative and coherent way of working that is received and that then asks to be recreated. Style in this sense is available only to the abstract artist. Paradoxically it has turned out that, in the modern period, the only way to sustain a living continuity and connection with the tradition of representational art is to undo or disassemble it. Our democratic and pluralistic society provides the artist with no positive collective values, and the free, open market means that the painter is given no tasks, no problems of either content or form. The most obvious area left where common "problems" can arise, "problems" or tasks with which the artist can choose to engage and which can stimulate and challenge his imagination, seems that of the abstract, formal values. Since all art is the result of compromise, emphasis, and subordination, any given pictorial solution, if concentrated upon and made an "issue" of, can evoke a new problem and hence further development. The impetus to further painting becomes, to a far greater extent than formerly, "problems" internal to painting itself. This approach, the so-called modernist one, has resulted in increasing abstractness and finally in total non-objectivity. Nature was first chosen primarily because it adapted itself to style, to a formal impulse (Monet's *Lily Pads* or Matisse's interiors): it became with Cubism an ideograph, a mere sign, a mere graphic notation, sometimes (with Klee and Miró), a pretext or a poetic afterthought like the title. In recent years this concentration on purely pictorial problems has become even more intense and self-conscious; reference to the real world has been abolished altogether, even something to be consciously avoided. The visual coordinates of a picture's literal self—flatness and the enclosing shape—become the sole determinants of drawing (as was already the case with Mondrian), and the emphasis on the expressive presentation of materials precludes depiction of any sort—even of abstract "forms". Line becomes the result of dripping paint or the final boundary of a spreading stain and not the contour of anything that could be construed as preexistent. Finally color became the primary expressive agent, further subordinating drawing and shape, which, in turn, have found their place in abstract sculpture. This process has challenged painters to new and startlingly inventive "solutions" and to a level of quality that, whether or not equal to that of the greatest art of the past, is the very highest we posses. Yet however exalted the achievements of modernism, however fruitful, it cannot be denied that this unraveling process is at the same time a narrowing and hermetic one; radical and critical rather than synthetic in its relation to the past.

As a result the representational painter finds himself not only without style and alienated from his own tradition but also excluded from the only modern tradition that seems to have real vitality. Ambition is defined by an alienated past and modernity by an approach that has become utterly inimical to representation of any kind. Hence the decision to paint representationally means doubt about one's relevance—or even the possibility of relevance. Representational painters may feel that abstract painting "isn't enough" or is "empty" or "too easy", but they also worry about whether their own art is really modern in a significant way.

Thomas Cole. *The Architect's Dream*, 1840. Oil, 54" × 84". Collection: The Toledo Museum of Art

II

So our modern period lacks style in the traditional sense, in the collective sense, i.e. style as a certain common set of generalizations and idealizations or as certain decorative conventions. The nineteenth century could achieve a sense of style, if not style itself, only by dismantling style—dismantling it in favor of either a purely objective or purely personal, subjective approach to nature. It sought stylelessness for the sake of immediacy, "honesty" and personal directness—or, what is the same thing, as a way of escaping that "disassociation of sensibility", that self-consciousness which the modern period imposes on us all. And when, partly as a result of abstract art, this self-consciousness increased, so the urgency to commit oneself totally to one or the other—to the object or to one's feeling about it—objectivity or subjectivity—has increased also. In this century the situation has become so exacerbated that the commitment itself becomes debilitatingly self-conscious. This I take to be the reason for the thin, brittle character of virtually all representational painting after Fauvism—at least when compared either to its counterpart in the past or to the phenomenally flat yet aesthetically dense and full-bodied feeling of our best abstract painting. So, too, being cut off from the continuity of its own tradition means that contemporary representational painting has no common style and by its very nature is diverse. (This alienation and diversity are the direct causes of the extreme sectarianism so common among representational painters, and it is why so many of them want to see themselves either as holding out for the true tradition or as beginning a new one). There are, however, discernable trends, tendencies. As we have noted, these trends are exacerbated versions of the same "styleless" ones which existed in the nineteenth century: an uncompromising, exact, almost photographic or *trompe-l'œil* realism (Ingres, Meissonier, Gerôme, Eakins, Waldmüller and later verist surrealists like Dali, *Neusachlichkeit* artists like Otto Dix, today's photo realists, etc.) and a painterly naturalism more or less expressionistic in emphasis—a bit of nature seen through temperament (Corot, Constable, Manet, the Impressionists, and later the Fauves, the Ash Can School, Soutine, etc.). In either case—and the latter has been more common than the former—there is an attempt to embrace the lack of style and affirm it as a virtue; to assume a stance of stylelessness as more honest, or as leaving more room for personal spontaneity. These two approachs yield the most consistently happy, albeit modest, results. Examples of the first tendency abound especially, but not solely, in the area of landscape painting, Fairfield Porter, Neil Welliver are perhaps the two leading figures here. The more modern looking of the two, Welliver is an especially interesting case in the way he uses abrupt value contrasts and a deliberately schematic palette to set off—van Gogh like—his feeling for composition, crisp patterns and his assured, graphic brushwork. Porter's touch is less detailed and ornamental, rougher and larger. He, too, often favors bright color, abrupt contrasts and pattern effects, but he combines these with soft brushiness and soft color. Very fine, too, are the occasional landscapes of Lennart Ander-



William Beckman. *Self Portrait*, 1972. By courtesy of the Allan Stone Gallery, New York

Lennart Anderson. *Nude on Chair*. Lent to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

son, Sidney Tillim, or certain pictures of Paul Georges and Wayne Thiebaud.[1]

The leading exponents of that tendency which aims at intensity of objective realization are William Beckman and Richard Estes. Estes, who often paints from photographic slides is close—in manner, if not in quality—to Canaletto and other perspective painters (Canaletto often used the camera obscura) while Beckman adopts the polished manner of the fifteenth-century Flemings. Very modern in feeling, Estes' successes have been with chiaroscuro painting and limited color schemes (e.g. *Helene's Florist*, 1971; *Escalator*, 1969; and *Subway*, 1969). In recent works, he has used bright, hard colors with disastrous results. Beckman, on the other hand, tends to dilute his manner when he employs his essentially miniaturist technique on too large a scale, and his best picture to date is a small ($11\frac{1}{2}'' \times 9\frac{1}{2}''$) self-portrait.

A third less clearly defined tendency might be called "lyrical classicism"—a trend which began with Corot and Ingres but later took on a definite nostalgic and detant character (Puvis de Chavannes, Hans von Marées, Picasso, Matisse, and Derain of the 1920's, and more recently Balthus, Gabriel Laderman and Lennart Anderson). Classicism being already a highly artificial aesthetic construct dovetails nicely with modernist "formalism". But for this very reason it is particularly vulnerable to self-conscious, even Whistlerian aestheticism. This can be seen clearly enough in the work of Anderson who, until recently, was our best figure painter. Eschewing sharp value contrasts and dramatic effects, he relies on middle tone shadows, fragile draughtsmanship, and a very poetic sense of color. But even Anderson's best pictures seem tentative, to lack a final accent, and to suffer from his tendency to center each composition. Also, Anderson's works of the past few years show a noticeable decline in their dense, heavy use of earth colors, hot hues, more forceful modeling, and sharper contrasts—all of which stifles rather than supports his sensibility. Only at his very best can Anderson come close to Balthus, the leading representational painter in Europe, and even then his works remain modest and lack a truly modern feeling. Of course, it is inevitable that any work will show its date of origin (this is true even of a forgery where the intent is exactly to mask the date), but beyond this, modernity must be, as Baudelaire was the first to point out, positively expressive if the work is to be serious, original art.

Another tendency which overlaps a bit with the last one is a procedure that explicitly derives a sense of style from representational styles of the past, from representation's own tradition. So for example a recognizable older style can be employed to dignify contemporary subject matter; this was the approach of many artists of the 1930's like Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, Reginald Marsh, and Ben Shahn. Here again it is only the subject that is modern, and today most of these works, however successful on their own terms, look like period pieces in a way that the art of the past does not.

Even more consistently, one can take the form *and the subject* from a great style of the past. Here the problem is to avoid outright anachronism, the pastiche, or academism. This latter kind of traditionalism is essentially a salvage operation, and modernism here need only be sufficient to make revival plausible. It is better when the modernism comes naturally, organically, when the style chosen somehow lends itself to modernization and when this modernity is *won* and not willfully imposed.

One obvious example of this is Picasso's neo-classicism of the 20's, which was based not on a revival of any specific classical idiom but rather on a general feeling for style. Picasso perceived that one cannot merely present the chosen past but must also include our distance from it; yet he wished to do this in such a way that the essential "feel" was traditional—in this case, antique, not modern. Taking his cue from Puvis de Chavannes, who had preceded him in this, Picasso made the modern distance a psychological one, a nostalgia for a lifeless past, a silent and

Neil Welliver. *Shadow over Zeke's*, 1974. Oil, 72" × 96". By courtesy of Allendale Insurance, Rhode Island

static time known to us through dusty pots, sculptured stone, and frescoed walls.

Another less personal approach was that of Maillol, or the later Derain, who made the modern distance not something psychological but purely aesthetic, subtle but enough to reinvest and gently modernize an idiom from the past. As we shall see, Horacio Torres seeks a similar result, but his art is rougher and more the result of a struggle between modernism and tradition than a smooth concordance with it. Like Picasso, he takes as his object of imitation not just the human figure but a whole idiom, a style, a genre from the past. Torres seizes this object with a vision both direct and aesthetically distanced, both immediate and informed by abstraction; when successful this adds a convincing modernism to his revived traditionalism. But from another perspective, Torres can be seen as engaging with modernism more directly. It is this which permits him to challenge, if not overcome, the modesty of contemporary representational art.

And modesty is exactly the problem, for if we are alienated from the past, we are nonetheless judged by it. And there is always the spectre of abstract art and Baudelaire's problem of "being of one's time". The preeminence of modernism over the past seventy years has driven many representational artists to try to derive a sense of contemporary relevance and ambition from abstract painting. This was easier when the prevailing modernism was cubism, an "abstracting" approach which always remained tied to nature. While not escaping modesty, painters like Sheeler, O'Keeffe, Dove and others were still able to find room for their personal sensibilities and modernist sentiments in an area between representation and abstraction. Essentially this amounted to simplification and learning to select their subjects with an abstractionist's eye. But as modernism becomes more integrally abstract and increasingly poses issues peculiar to itself, this fusion of representation and modernity becomes ever more problematic. So recent efforts to marry the two in the interests of representation have meant very large scale, hard edges or an aggressively broad painterliness, high-keyed color, biaxial symmetry, frontal directness or an all over filling up of the entire surface. The results here have often been strident—lending impact, force, and modernity to representation at the cost of degrading it. Everything seems strained, and one detects an ambition that outstrips inspiration, even a note of desperation.

This is true of most of the pop and photo realists such as Chuck Close, as well as semi-pop artists like Alex Katz and Jack Beal; it is also true to a lesser extent of many "studio" realists like Alfred Leslie and even Phillip Pearlstein. Leslie seems intent on squandering his great facility on pretentious and stagy ideas while Pearlstein, ostensibly a more serious artist, paints the human figure in such a dead, leathery manner that he undermines any power that his pictures might possess. And like many of the others his work often seems suspended between crass vulgarity and mannerism; stylelessness and stylization. Representation and recent modernism remain disruptively conjoined rather than synthesized.

Horacio Torres' art also exactly mirrors and expresses the present situation in that it, too, is a conjunction rather than a synthesis of modernism and representation; and contemporary, also, is the way that he pushed both tendencies to their extremes. But thanks to his personal affinities for certain styles of the past, Torres has been able to make this conjunction—and potential disjunction—a stimulus to his own kind of inventiveness; he has so organized himself as to make the present dilemma of representational painting the subject of his pictures.

III

If much or even most of the better painting today continues to be representational, the best abstract art has an authority and fullness about it which is not to be found in even the best representational painting. Torres comes closest to transcending this situation or at least to avoiding what I have called the thin,

Torres. *Resting Figure on Green*, 1973. 52" × 68". Courtesy Noah Goldowsky Gallery, New York

brittle feeling of current representational painting. His pictures have not yet been widely enough seen for their importance to be generally recognized. Indeed, much of the art public is not aware of them at all. On first showing, his paintings have been completely rejected or ignored even by those who normally overvalue representational art and who see every new manifestation of it as the sign of a new dawn. This in itself is an indication of the solidity of his achievement.

Torres learned painting from his father, Joaquin Torres-Garcia, the Uruguayan painter famous as a founder of the group and periodical *Cercle et Carré* and as a painter of Cubist, semi-abstract pictures. Horacio's training, however, was based to a large extent on the study of the old masters, which his father regarded as essential. And like his father Torres worked in both modes, a figurative and an abstract-constructivist one, considering the two as different but complementary approaches to art making.

It was only at the end of 1971 after settling in New York that Torres began to paint original works of high quality. Not only did this involve his accepting the fact that he was a representational and figurative painter. It also involved perceiving that his veneration for tradition and his desire to be modern were problematic and related impulses. His modernity had to be won, his traditionalism justified, and the friction that their conjunction generated proved fruitful. This, of course, was the same perception and the same friction that animated many of the great masters of the late nineteenth century like Manet or Degas. But at the present historical moment the problem for figurative painting is no longer the nineteenth century one of achieving modernity but, as Torres' work demonstrates, to save tradition, or at least as much of it as can still be rendered viable.[2]

Torres' first step in this direction was to surrender the dark atmosphere with which he had previously enveloped his figures. Using brighter color he raised the whole key of his picture. And the lighter key meant a flatter effect. It was like the change that took place at the very beginning of modernism when Manet rejected the "brown sauces" inherited from the Barbizon School and the Dutch and sought a modern clarity, immediacy, and directness. It is also analogous to the difference between the Spanish *tenebroso* of Ribera and his followers on the one hand and the higher key of Veronese and the great Italian decorators and muralists on the other. Everything is brought forward, and the organization of the surface begins to play a far greater role in the final result.

In this way Torres forced a modernism into his pictures—forced himself to deal with more modern issues. And "forced" is the proper word here, for Torres' main allegiance is to tradition. Hence a tension characterized his art—the result of a struggle between the romantic Spanish tradition of dark painting and modernism but also, to a lesser extent, between Italianate idealizing tendencies and this same modernism. Much of the vitality of Torres' work derives from this struggle; love of the past and fear of anachronism are in conflict, and this conflict is a challenge to his imagination. A modern feel is achieved personally and "against the grain" as it were, and in ways that do not violate or vulgarize his sources. On the other hand Torres has chosen

Two Nudes against the Sky, 1972. 66" × 74". Collection Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design; Nancy Sales Day Collection

Torso Wrapped in Red Draperies, 1973. 50" × 36". Noah Goldowsky Gallery, New York

Nude. Oil on canvas, 60″ × 84″

Nude on Green Background, 1973. Oil on canvas, 66″ × 95″. (Both illustrations by courtesy of Noah Goldowsky Gallery, New York)

Female Torso with White Draperies, 1972. 37″ × 24½″. Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago

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Torso, 1972. 42″ × 22″. Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago

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sources that have distinctly modern possibilities. For the "decorative" or "Venetian" mode that he employs was from the beginning a very abstract approach and one that was originally developed both to describe a rich, coloristic reality and also to hold the plane.

One might discern two opposite poles in the history of Western painting. One is the approach common to so many Italian Renaissance pictures where the artist is primarily interested in evoking three-dimensional convex volumes: a figure appears as detached mass. In the extreme case we are more or less indifferent to what surrounds this volume, as in Michelangelo's painting. This mode approaches colored bas-relief; it was a procedure especially suited for monumental decoration, harmonizing with the plastic sculptural detail employed in the early Renaissance architecture and furniture; and it was adaptable to that interest in the form of the human figure that so much concerned this same period.

The other approach concentrates first on space and on the total visual field rather than on sculptural volume. The primary concern is for relative positions in a fully developed space. This is the procedure we find in much Western landscape painting. It calls for strict control of values, and in its extreme form strives for the complete visual effect, as in the works of Van Eyck, the Dutch, and in Velásquez' *Las Meninas*. Unity depends less on conscious composition than on the consistency of the total impression.

A third mode, the Venetian or Decorative, falls somewhere between the sculptural mode and the total visual effect: it is more completely pictorial and painterly than the relief mode, yet more arbitrary, full bodied, and decorative than the work of a painter like Vermeer.

As Arthur Pope has said: "When one comes to examine Venetian painting closely, one finds that the rendering of space is in fact accomplished largely by abstract means and not by an exact rendering of value and intensity relations . . .; and in spite of the general effect of large masses of light and shadow, the tone relations in individual fields depend more on exigencies of pigment material and technical procedures and design than on any attempt at accurate naturalistic rendering of tone relations."[3]

The main point here is that we are dealing with a highly abstract style. Unity is achieved by an artificial light and dark pattern and/or the decorative contrast between colors; masses and hues are arbitrarily opposed and balanced; modeling and light effects are manipulated to reinforce the whole effect. The definition of a light is approximate, not specific, and it is sacrificed if necessary for the sake of decorative meaning. Touch is now blended or softly caressing, molding and shaping a form—now put down brusquely in patches that merely suggest color and tone. Back and forth have conventional limits and are achieved with no loss of feeling of surface or architectural significance. Large shapes and compelling lines constitute a formal composition. As with the relief mode there is a balanced composition (rather than the effect of visual consistency) that counts as unity; but nonetheless there is a strong feeling of an independent light and air. With this system each area of color may require a different and separate process of working to secure the quality of tint or to engage it in a semblance of chiaroscuro effect. And great liberties are taken with gravity, anatomy, and perspective. The work is naturalistically convincing, but this need only be sufficient, for the result is also meant to be tapestry-like and decorative, to go with a style of architecture, in which the heavy gold moldings allowed somewhat greater freedom in the pictorial arrangement than did the flatter decorative schemes of the fifteenth century.[4]

Formally the Venetian mode demands largeness of compositional conception—the utmost enlargement of the unit of design: the invention of such postures as would make the parts of the body, the head, trunk, limbs, merely so many subordinate divisions of a single unit. Now to do this so that the effect would carry from a distance meant extremely emphatic and rhythmical poses. Such poses are either dramatic and rhetorical or decorous and relaxed; the former is more suitable for monumental narrative, the latter for subsidiary figures and female divinities.

Of course the motivation here was not merely formal, i.e., decorative demands, (although this motivation was far more important than our art histories are usually willing to admit). Broad, generalized figures displaying large and graceful movements imply a moral, ideal content. They prompt the imagina-

Back against Blue Sky, 1972. 28" × 16". Collection Dr. and Mrs. Henry L. Foster, Newton Centre, Mass.

Profile, 1972. 36" × 24". Noah Goldowsky Gallery, New York

Nude on White Draperies, 1972. 55" × 86". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Morton G. Neumann, Chicago

tion to a mood of elevated detachment. But it should also be noted that this content occurs regardless of the *specific* actions that occupy the figures. This because such figures, apart from what they are doing, seem to embody a state of being, an idealized existence for which their specific action is, from the point of view of expression, hardly more than an excuse for their appearance. On the other hand the sex of the figure can be made more important; for the feeling content suggested by the noble yet full, sensual female nude, as it occurs in Venetian painting and in Rubens, is a natural subject for the broad, full, and sensuous painterliness and color of this manner. Venus symbolizes or focuses the radiant beauties that pervade the picture as a whole.

Torres finds the Venetian mode with its generalized content, its concessions to surface, and with the room it leaves for personal handling and color particularly congenial both to his own gifts and sensibility and to the demands of modernism. The abstractness, the flexibility, and the surface-conscious character of this mode enable him to reconceive it in a distinctly modern way while retaining some of its authority and grandness.

IV

A typical picture by Torres shows a single female nude seated or reclining on a draped support and posed against a colored background. The monumental pose is a conventional, decorous one borrowed from or clearly reminiscent of the past, and the head or other parts of the body are often cropped off or, sometimes, hidden by drapery or an arm. The design is carried by the broad, fluent, continuous rhythm of the figure; most often a simple diagonal opposed to a large area of emptiness.

One thinks first of Velásquez and Goya and then of Titian, and the Baroque in Rome.[5] To the Italianate amplitude, breadth, and fullness of form is added the cool, sometimes silvery tone of Velásquez or, alternately, a touch of the somber sonorousness of Zurburán and other Spanish masters. That is, while the color and tonalities tend to be Spanish in feeling, the conception of form departs from the Spanish realist tradition for the Italian idealizing one. And a painterly fusion of a heavy and rich sensuality with the ideal form is Titianesque and far from the intellectual approach to the nude found in central Italy. Less carefully proportioned into regularity the Venetian Venus is more real, physical, even slightly overripe and with the faintest touch of awkwardness. One responds less to the perfection of underlying geometry than to the visual seduction of the flesh, of color, texture, and paint. Torres' nudes are also pre-eighteenth century in their avoidance of anything like the *petite* or "charm"; so too they are distant from the human still-lifes given to us by realist painters from the mid-nineteenth century to the present.

These pictures do not depict studio nudes or "bathers" or make any other concession to naturalism. Rather they openly declare themselves as aesthetic abstractions from the past. The scale and breadth of handling in any given work by Torres exceeds that found in a normal easel painting of that size. Together with the lighter key resulting from working directly on a white ground the effect is to a certain extent like that of fresco, as if a detail of a ceiling mural meant originally to be seen at substantial physical remove from the viewer has been translated into an easel painting done in oils with all of the concentration, density, and directness of that medium; as though easel painting were used to abstract and transform the mural.

So too an idealized nude, drapery, and a colored background are already abstractions from time or place; and Torres presents these elements abstracted from a specific subject or decorative scheme. Finally the three elements are conceived of as distinct and abstract—they are handled differently, made equal in importance, more nakedly contrasted than in the prototype, and combined in what is far more explicitly an artistic whole. That is to say, the Venetian mode allows Torres a very modern degree of abstraction and purely aesthetic manipulation.

Modern too is the *alla prima* directness, the expressive brushwork, harshness of accent and sharpness of contrast. There are no transparent shadows, no glazing, no imposed or all-enveloping golden light or porous fusion of flesh and air of the kind we find in Velásquez or Titian. Torres' abruptness, starkest in his whites, is only rarely found in older painting (as in El Greco and Goya) and rarer still to this degree. The surface created by the dragging of a loaded brush and the roughness of this application, which sometimes leaves lumps and patches of pigment on the surface, are all modern in their "coarse" expressiveness.

The conventional poses are frequently pressed into profile so that the picture develops laterally across the surface rather than back into depth. This compression is accentuated by the composition; usually a simple diagonal movement not balanced by a counter movement from within but dependent on the area of

Reclined Nude on Blue Background, 1973. 54" × 72". Goldowsky

Fragment of Nude on Green, 1972. 57" × 62". Goldowsky

Fragment of Nude on Draperies, 1973. 50" × 52". Goldowsky 7310

Nude with Red Background, 1972. 48" × 57". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Noah Goldowsky

chromatic emptiness and by the framing, the cropping, for its completeness, i. e., a completeness that is explicitly aesthetic. Both flatness and the shape of the support—the two co-ordinates of modernist easel painting—perceptibly govern the compositional choices.

Torres' pictorial idea then is to deal with representational elements as abstract ones, to orient them toward and relate them across the surface; yet to continue to paint them as more or less fully modeled in three dimensions. Of course, most older painting is a compromise between three-dimensional form and two-dimensional surface. What is distinctive to Torres' work is that the orientation to the surface is much greater; the space far more collapsed. The closing off of the background, the broad, rough handling, the brighter colors and lighter key as well as the decorative arrangements and dense treatment of negative areas all add up to a far more aggressive picture than we find in comparable painting of the old masters. Yet Torres continues to present the logic of reality palpably realized through modeling and subtle chiaroscuro transitions. In theory this conception is radically contradictory; in practice it puts great pressure on the artist's capacity to realize. And it causes difficult problems and calls for a whole range of creative adjustments and compromises. Here again the abstractness and flexibility of the Venetian mode serve Torres well.

A "problem" is isolated and confined by concentrating on only three elements: figure, drapery, and background. The drapery is there not so much to reveal and accent the human form as to play against it and to enframe it, to keep it close to the surface or push the flesh tones closer to the background in value. This is also accomplished by the arbitrary device of lightening the background area just behind the form and simultaneously accenting the contour of that form. This not only distinguishes the planes but at the same time makes the ground seem subtly responsive to the figure. And the arbitrary use of contrasts and edges also emphasizes the abstract accenting of the whole and reinforces its rhythms. In many of his latest pictures the color is much brighter and the poses are more frontal, with knees and arms projecting plastically outward. That is, Torres is simultaneously heightening both the abstract and the illusionistic sense of directness. In turn this puts greater strain on his capacity to unify volume and surface. But again it must be stressed that he does not achieve his unities in any systematic or consistent way. What is emphasized in one area is compensated for elsewhere. There is no smoothly consistent style throughout the picture but a whole series of adjustments and balancings, often of elements as unlike as tactile volume and optical color.

Torres' essential problem remains the human figure. Already a highly coherent, autonomous entity and possessing a subtle chiaroscuro, it has its own strong sense of presence and potentiality for willed action. It can easily isolate or, if the adjustment is not correct, it can compete for our attention with the treatment of drapery or the color of the background. This is one reason for Torres' croppings, which tie the figure to the edges. Along with the rhythmical poses this device strengthens the abstract design, helps flatten the figure, and undermines its autonomy.[6]

A related problem involves the handling of the head. Being the locus of all human intimacy and expression, the face is harder to simplify without distortion or evoking disturbing or distracting associations. Hence Torres needs a special and distinct effort to simply make it equal to the rest, which is his aim. So he must so de-emphasize it or emphasize other parts of the body that no disparity of focus occurs.[7]

This is by no means a new problem. The more abstract and flat a picture becomes, the more color, composition, and handling bear the burden of expression, the more must the head be muted as accent. This can be clearly seen in the work of a painter like Tintoretto, where heads turn away or are in shadow or otherwise obscured, or again in the generalized and sometimes casual characterization of the great decorators like Rubens and Tiepolo. Manet wanted a modern immediacy and directness; a brighter and flatter picture needed a new distance, one that was not spatial but psychological. Hence the deadpan expressions of his figures (and his "formal" symmetrical compositions of the 1880's); they have an immediacy, a "connection" with the viewer, but their physiognomic expressiveness is deliberately blunted.

Manet was preceded in this approach by Ingres (in the *Valpiçon Bather*) and followed by Degas, who at the end of his life became extremely willful in treating the human figure as a mere formal element. Faces are muted, and the figure is manipulated by repeating, copying, reversing, and cropping into new aesthetic wholes. The modeled forms of the human anatomy are worked into formal, compositional arrangements and played off against brightly colored ambiance and draperies. Abrupt croppings, originally a device to evoke greater naturalness, now became a means to create the opposite—artificiality. For these cuttings originally had been employed to convey a sense of space beyond, continuing behind the frame, and later to get an Impressionist momentariness, a snapshot-like spontaneity. In the work of the later Degas it is a way of undermining the integrity of the representational so as to assert the sovereignty of the aesthetic whole—one created solely by the artist. Rodin and Maillol followed a similar procedure in their sculpture.

Nude Fragment on White and Blue Draperies, 1972. 19" × 26". Goldowsky Gallery

Resting Nude, 1972

Figure on Red Background, 1973. 50″ × 64″. Goldowsky Gallery

Resting Nude on Green, 1972. 36″ × 45″. Goldowsky Gallery

Of course the cropping off of heads and, to a less extent, other parts of the human form raises serious problems of expression. In certain of Torres' pictures—usually smaller canvases—the whole exists as a framed detail that has about it an abstractness and a satisfying completeness despite the fact that essential parts of the figure are missing. In other cases the figure seems truncated and the picture is suspended between the abstract justness of composition and a certain sense of arbitrariness. The latter is something Torres has had to accept at least temporarily for the sake of the presence and particular feeling that the full-bodied nude can convey (and which, above all else, he loves to paint). In certain pictures he has surmounted this difficulty by de-emphasizing the face in one way or another. But one feels that this problem is ultimately the traditional one of idealization; now, however, this problem must be approached from a distinctly modern angle: idealization for the sake of form.[8]

Another problem that Torres has not yet solved is that of combining two or more figures rhythmically and formally without evoking anything to suggest the narrative, dramatic, or psychological, i.e., relationships that would call for traditional,

(Concluded on page 39)

Nude on Red Draperies, 1973. 50″ × 72″. Goldowsky Gallery

Reclining Nude, 1972. 30″ × 60″. Goldowsky Gallery

deeper, space.[9] The resolution to each of Torres' "problems" has to be discovered anew because of the nontraditional way in which he conceives his pictures—conjoining full-bodied human figures and draperies with a modern directness and sense of surface. And again it is the stimulus to invention evoked by this ambition and its concomitant difficulties that is largely responsible for that freshness and originality which his pictures have.

But the modern character of Torres' pictures notwithstanding, what is most startling about them in the present historical context is their outrageous traditionalism, and in the end what clearly redeems them from being naive and absurd anachronisms is less their conception—which serves mainly as a stimulus—than their realization; their sincerity and conviction lie essentially in the deeply felt way they are painted. This is not simply a matter of loose, painterly handling but an expressive phrasing that must be continually invented; ordered yet varied, avoiding both mannerism and empty bravura, acknowledging the decorative and, at the same time, evoking a rich and mobile reality. Here, together with his beautiful and personal sense of color, lies the inspiration in Torres' pictures. It is what permits him to legitimately reclaim something of the grand and authoritative character of our humanist tradition.

NOTES

1. The only other contender in my view is Balthus, but I have not seen enough of his recent work to tell if, as seems to be the case, his painting has gone into eclipse.
2. Cézanne was perhaps the first modernist to consciously face the problem of saving tradition. That is, Cézanne's was a synthetic approach rather than the radical one of his contemporary, Monet.
3. Arthur Pope, *The Language of Drawing and Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1949, pp. 89–90. This exposition of the Venetian mode is with some modifications taken from Pope. See also *Titian's Rape of Europa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1960, and also Roger Fry, "El Greco", in *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto & Windus), 1920.
4. Pope, *The Language of Drawing and Painting*, p. 92.
5. Among the sources for Torres' poses seem to be Velásquez' *Rokeby Venus*, Titian's *Diana and Actaeon*, *Diana and Callisto*, and also Michelangelo's *Ignudi* and *Slaves*.
6. Torres has remarked that when painting a figure he often becomes so involved with it that he loses interest and neglects the rest. He then has difficulty making his figure into a picture.
7. When working from life (which is almost always the case) Torres often paints the body first. If he begins with the head he finds that he gets too involved with detail and does not achieve the proper degree of generalization to match the rest. In principle this is not so different from the procedure of an artist like Raphael, who first worked out the pose and composition in drawings and dealt with the specific features of the head either in other drawings or only in the final picture. Even the old masters were not always successful in dealing with this problem. For example Veronese in his painting of heads was often too literal and pedestrian, thereby undermining the presiding grandness of his conception as a whole. One might also note here that while other highly detailed areas of form of the human body like feet and hands can easily be seen as extensions of the larger rhythms created by arms, legs, and trunk the head is an unrepeated, isolated, and focal member.
8. Torres is perfectly capable of painting heads and of painting them brilliantly, as his portraits demonstrate. It is perhaps interesting to note here that Armenini in his *De veriprecetti della pittura* (1586) remarks that usually an artist who excels at drawing (*designo*, i.e., idealization) is weaker at the painting of portraits and vice versa.
9. While in most of Torres' works the figure is the most commanding element, in others, usually smaller ones, the drapery is more dominant. Also in the smaller works the croppings tend to be more unexpected and the space deeper.