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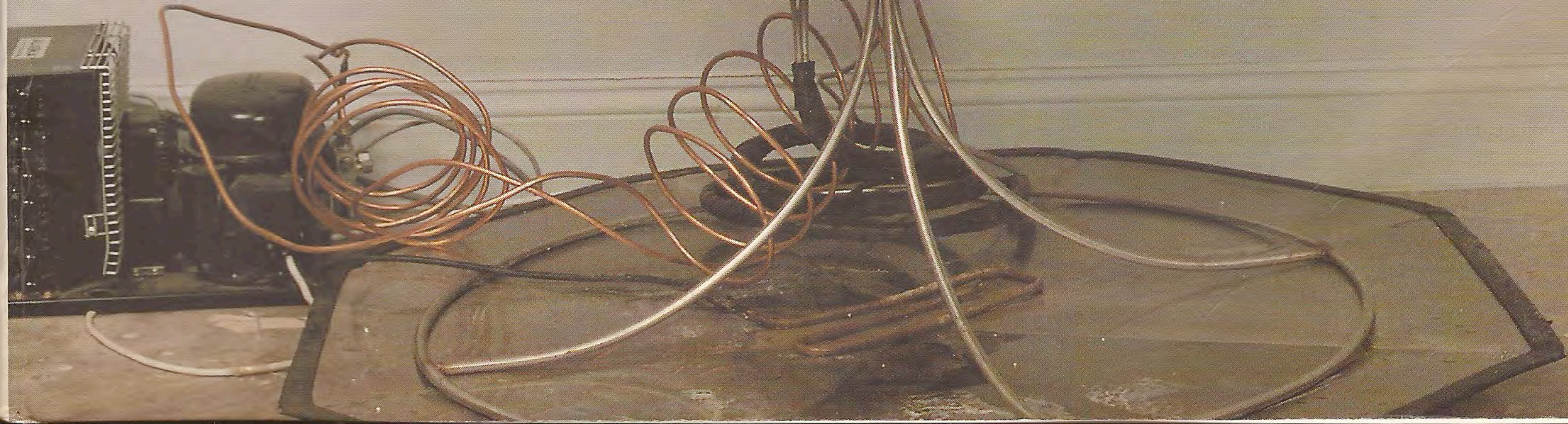
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**ULF  
ROLLOF**





*Τύπου*, 1955, αναθεωρημένο το 1958). Αυτό έχει γίνει άρθρο της πίστης στον ρεντουκτιβισμό, ο Goldberg όμως θα διαφωνούσε λέγοντας ότι η πίστη καθ'εαυτή είναι μια από τις ιδιότητες που απαιτεί η ζωγραφική. Οι μουσαμάδες λες και ισχυρίζονται ότι με την πίστη ο καλλιτέχνης περιέλαβε ίσως κι ένα ευρύ φάσμα πολιτιστικού υλικού, μαζί με το κυριολεκτικό υλικό του μέσου του. Είναι μια θέση ακατάδεκτη που ριψοκινδυνεύει την κατηγορία της επιτήδευσης ή του τεχνητού.

Το παράδοξο του ρόλου του δανδή – του παρακμιακού λόγω της απομάκρυνσης από την ευθύνη της κοινωνίας – είναι η ταπεινότητα που αναγνώριζε ο Wilde στο *De Profundis*. «Απ'όλα τα πράγματα είναι το πιο παράδοξο: κάτι που δεν μπορείς να το χαρίσεις και δεν μπορεί να στο χαρίσει άλλος». Η ταπεινότητα είναι αυτή η οποία στηρίζει τη σταδιοδρομία του αυθεντικού καλλιτέχνη, και όμως αυτήν υποτιμούν ή αγνοούν πιο συχνά: την ταπεινότητα να αφεθεί το μέσον να υπαγορεύσει το πλήρες φάσμα των δυνατοτήτων του, να επιλέξει και να καθορίσει κάθε φάσμα χαρακτηριστικών ή δυνατοτήτων που επιβάλλουν περιορισμούς στη θέληση του καλλιτέχνη, την τόσο υπερεκτιμημένη στον μετά-Νιτσεϊκό κόσμο. Οι συνέπειες ενός τέτοιου αυτοκαθορισμού είναι προφανείς στα περιορισμένα εγχειρήματα και τις αυτοκαταστροφικές συνήθειες πολλών από τους διασημότερους αφηρημένους ζωγράφους, που καταλήγουν να δημιουργούν διαδοχικές παρωδίες του αρχικού τους ενθουσιασμού, ξαναδουλεύοντας στο ίδιο σχήμα ή παλέτα ή σε κάποιο άλλο απομονωμένο φορμαλιστικό στοιχείο.

Ο Thoreau έγραφε: «Και αν έχω ψεύτικα δόντια, θέλω να πιστεύω ότι δεν έχω ψευτική συνείδηση... Παίρνοντας αιθέρα προ ημερών πείστηκα πόσο πολύ μπορεί να κομματιαστεί ο άνθρωπος όταν χωριστεί από τις αισθήσεις του... Υπάρχεις στις ρίζες σου, όπως το δέντρο τον χειμώνα». Ο χρονικογράφος αφουγκραζόταν τον δικό του παλμό για να ξέρει πού να επανέλθει. Αν η ζωγραφική είναι ένα δέντρο τον χειμώνα, η πιο πρόσφατη δουλειά του Goldberg είναι πολύ καλή ένδειξη ώσπου να ανθίσει πάλι. Ο καλλιτέχνης αφουγκράζεται τον σφυγμό του μέσου, έτσι ώστε να έχει χώρο να συμμετάσχει ξανά.

Monroe Denton

(Μετάφραση από τα Αγγλικά: Χίλντα Παπαδημητρίου)

## Michael Goldberg

### He Paints in Rothko's Studio

(Some Notes on the Exhibition at Lennon-Weinberg Gallery)

This is what it's like to see a painter in the grip of maturity. It's been a long time since we have been confronted by this spectacle. Maybe it was Matisse. Picasso's grandeur extended into his final years, but his rage against impotence could hardly be regarded as maturity. Pollock died on the near shore of wisdom. De Kooning is in senescence; we shall have to wait long to comprehend, sort out and evaluate the exact nature of his work.

Michael Goldberg has successively explored the potential of paint as substance, the canvas as support and as object, space as proportion and arena, but most importantly the intangible quality of color and stuff and relationship. It is this, which is as much a property of paint as any other, that sets him apart from other great mature artists working at the moment, some of whom are still using paint, but Robert Ryman and Jasper Johns come to mind first as conceptualists and only secondarily as exploring the full possibilities of the medium. And Gerhard Richter's oeuvre would seem to be about a Germanic argumentation, distilling and setting out the possible theses rather than working toward synthesis.

One has to go back to Pollock of the all-over period to find the parallel to Goldberg's latest venture. To secure his place in the tradition, the artist has begun to engage the most debased currency of his medium, illusionism.

Is it Goya with whom the artist has established his colloquy? It's a surprising choice. But that seems the answer in this movement between illusion and materiality, which by definition engages, successively, belief and cognition. That element of the passage from the "stuffiness" of the viscous medium to what it represents is within the hackneyed vocabulary of any photorealist or academic of even moderate abilities. But to engage the next step – to enter into a reciprocity of doubt and belief engaged by the intellect – that's the arena of Giotto, Castagno, Titian, through to Manet and through the briefest epiphany in Pollock (that moment from 1948 to 1951) in our hard-headed modernist world.





MICHAEL GOLDBERG: *Eastchester Road*, 1996. Λάδι σε μουσαμά / Oil on canvas, 175 x 264.7 cm

If painting is to continue to have import, it must open the framework, Derrida's *parergon*, to reincorporate itself within the space from which it was exiled. There is, therefore, a fascination with concepts of spatiality – with depth, even illusionism – in many painters today which escapes the “pop” or “zing” opticality of pure *Gestalt*. In the U.S., these artists are mature, having worked their way through years of observing the picture plane's flatness, to a faith in painting without an attendant metaphysics. Goldberg is a leader in this area, but other artists, such as Valerie Jaudon, are also working in the same space. Frank Stella finessed the problems of this discourse through intensely physicalizing his materials, to the degree that they became more sculpture than paintings. Jasper Johns' rootedness in the discourses of *Realism* yields a poetry of signs and symbols that ventures further into melancholy and absorption than anyone since (if not Cranach and Durer

then certainly) Redon. Are these claims too large? If so, why? Can one argue for a place for Goldberg within the history of art or even within the history of painting or abstraction? Perhaps painting's history *has* been marked “finis” and these are the efflorescences of decay. And, yet, the painter paints. The musical analogy might be Handel, “O, Death, Where Is Thy Sting?” That duet of fugitive harmonies is too sentimental, too rich. I acknowledge Bach and Wagner as grander architects of the sublime. Both Goldberg and Handel figure at times when contemplation or even sustained thought appear impossible or socially unredeemable.

The idea of faith in the face of death might explain the artist's odd attraction to Beccafumi, The Italian Mannerist, whose Sieneese decorations the artist finds endlessly fascinating. I used to think it was the perverse emotionalism rooted in narrative that recommended these Mannerist pieces, but I've begun to think it's the playing



with ideas of surface and space, with the tantalizing possibility of touch, doubled when denied.

It was interesting to enter the show at Lennon-Weinberg through Goldberg's own stumbling progress. The first room is dominated by a good enough work. It was a field of Joan Mitchell strokes with superimposed rectangles, a rather doctrinaire exhibit in Hans Hofmann influence, as if anyone wanted that pictorial rhetoric. In this way, the artist attaches himself to the declining thoughts of modernism's separation from social philosophy to a degree similar to Mitchell's attenuated response to Monet's own mining of an exhausted vocabulary. When Monet surrendered painting's optimism to existential fatalism, it was the opening wedge of the conceptual atheism of formalism. The Impressionist's

masterworks attach themselves to visual perceptions, but underneath is a despair that is ripe for the existentialists to mine. By the time Mitchell arrives, what remains is the activity of painting and a passing flirtation with "beauty" and "taste."

Goldberg is a painter. That means he's a dandy. He's is a decadent in today's world: another connection to Beccafumi, whose crepuscular effulgence might also indicate a persistence in his field past the point of necessity. This is a career that started in the 50s. He paints in Rothko's Bowery studio. The career has been marked by its longueurs, but in retrospect those periods were not just time keeping, making the wrist and arm and eye interlock, but true movements, sometimes spinings in space, true, but at each point the gyre opened to a new



MICHAEL GOLDBERG: *Bogdan I, Re Di Moldavia*, 1996. Oil on canvas, 96.5 x 101.6 cm



idea. The willingness to enter new spaces has kept this work fresh even when one might not like a particular period or moment in the career. That's why I will "give" the artist the Hofmann/Mitchell pastiche in the first gallery. Goldberg has never entered a personal mannerism to indicate the despair of so many of the Abstract Expressionists. Nor has he indulged in the decorativeness that undermines the second generation. What I see as his decadence, a nostalgic (and privileged) refusal to capitulate to the larger art world's abandonment of interest in painting, led him to painting's historic storehouse where in many of his peers it resulted in a retrenchment, a stubborn contest of wills.

He smoked good Cuban cigars long before that became fashionable, through the most abstemious moments of the art world. He wants to engage the full range of potential in the medium. Certainly one of the most significant (and historically validated) aspects of the paint medium is the possibility of representation. Representation itself exists outside the properties of the medium, but the qualities which make representation possible – color, sensuousness, sensuality and illusionism – and are the sources of the pleasure of recognition, are inherent in painting and the mediums of sculpture. Johns has played with these elements for some time now (especially in the form of trompe l'oeil), but wedded to symbolism. Goldberg dispenses with the object in favor of the continuing appeal of the oil medium.

The linen on which the largest piece in the exhibition, *Simon Avonatonkos' Father's Farm*, is painted, is itself an interesting case in point. It was stored in the artist's studio, where apparently it was water damaged, a problem which only became apparent after it was stretched and primed. Rather than throwing away the support, Goldberg reinforced the weak spots with four patches along the top border. At first glance, the patches don't show, then they may either be evident or disappear as one scans the surface, buried beneath the illusionism of the transparencies in this part of the composition. The circumstances of the damage means that the spots covered are almost, but not quite, regularly spaced (one has to take into account the thickness of the folds as well as

the improvisatory nature of the patches themselves). The artist could have imposed an order and introduced these as structural elements into the composition, but the result of this casualness is a material truth that underpins the aesthetic appreciation of the artwork.

Clement Greenberg wrote: "It seems to be a law of modernism – thus one that applies to almost all art that remains truly alive in our time – that the conventions not essential to the vitality of a medium be discarded as soon as they are recognized." (from *American Type Painting*, 1955 and revised 1958) This has become an article of faith for reductivism, but Goldberg would argue that faith itself is one of the qualities that painting demands. By faith, these canvases suggest, the artist would include a vast range of cultural material in addition to the literal material of his medium. It's an aloof position that risks the charge of posturing or artificiality.

The paradox of the dandy's role – decadent because outside the accountability of society – is the humility which Wilde recognized in *De Profundis*. "Of all things it is the strangest: one cannot give it away and another may not give it to one." It is that humility which sustains the purist artist's career, but which has been most often underestimated or ignored: the humility to let the medium dictate its full range of possibilities; to select and circumscribe any range of qualities or possibilities imposes the restrictions of the artist's will, so elevated in the post Nietzschean world. The consequences of such self-definition are evident in the limited enterprises and self-destructive habits of many of the most famous abstract painters, who end up creating successive parodies of their initial enthusiasm, reworking the same format or palette or other isolable formal element.

Thoreau wrote "If I have got false teeth, I trust that I have not got a false conscience.... By taking the ether the other day I was convinced how far asunder a man could be separated from his senses.... You exist in your roots, like a tree in the winter." The diarist kept his finger on himself to know where to return. If painting is a tree in winter, Goldberg's most recent work is as good a marker as any until its reblossoming. The artist is keeping his finger on the pulse of the medium so it has a space of reentry.

Monroe Denton