

Get Real

WHAT DO ARTISTS as diverse in style and substance as Edward Hopper, Paul Cadmus, Reginald Marsh, and Nancy Grossman have in common? Realism, according to the curators of a show now on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, titled “Modern American Realism: The Sara Roby Foundation Collection” and written about in this issue by associate editor Sarah Fensom (see page 82). A Hopper painting of a clapboard house bathed in sunlight is “realistic” in a way that a

Cadmus painting, with its punched-up, slightly eerie neo-Renaissance approach, could never be. A Marsh painting, slightly caricaturish, gives an emotionally heightened effect that is no one’s daily reality, while Grossman’s leather-covered wooden heads are more like dream apparitions than something one would see in waking life. Still, all these works were collected by one person with a firm sense of the meaning of realism in art. That meaning is more moral than mimetic—the works don’t necessarily render physical reality directly, but they do seem to share a sense of obligation to communicate something about the collective psychological and social reality of ordinary Americans. This is realism as a commitment to truth.

While some of the works in the Smithsonian show flirt with surrealism or abstraction, the paintings of Gordon Onslow Ford, a British-born Surrealist, go all the way, taking the viewer into visionary realms that seem to alternate between inner space and outer space (for a consideration of his career, see page 76). But



Onslow Ford, too, insisted that he was a realist, that his paintings were not just depictions of his own personal mental states but windows onto a universal psychological reality that the whole human race has in common. To wake other painters as well as viewers up to this reality was the mission of his life and art.

Of course every artist creates his or her own reality. Elsewhere in this issue we have a detailed examination of the design art of Louis Comfort Tiffany (see page 68), who made an idealized version of nature out of a special glass he invented. The painter Mary Abbott (see page 40) is an abstractionist, but her work has always drawn its inspiration from her experiences in nature, from Caribbean jungles to Hamptons flower gardens. Realism comes in many guises. —JOHN DORFMAN

■ Spring Online Subscription Special

Turn to page 94 to find your online promo code!

Receive a Two Year Subscription for the Price of One!