

# *Naked at the Edge: Louis Eilshemius and Bob Thompson*

by David Carrier

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Born into a wealthy American family, Louis Eilshemius (1864 - 1941) was trained in Paris. Although championed by Marcel Duchamp, who sponsored solo exhibitions of his art, he was so frustrated by lack of recognition that late in his long life he ceased to paint almost entirely and became at least a little crazy. Thierry de Duve, who speculatively links Eilshemius's erotic mythology with the iconography of Duchamp's *Large Glass*, describes his style as "hallucinatory and repetitive, his subject matter obsessed with impotent eroticism, and his technique crude and uncontrolled."<sup>1</sup> I think that judgment is too severe, but certainly these images of nymphs in distress in picturesque landscapes seem to identify Eilshemius as a very wayward 18th-century French painter. *Untitled (Love Bather)* (1917) places the bather on a rock in the ocean; *Untitled (Night Allegory)* (1915) sets two female nudes who have seemingly unreadable poses on a beach. And what in the world is happening in *Untitled (Sea Monster, Samoa)* (1907) in an odd tropical setting? Such is the power of his apparent naïveté that it's hard to decide whether Eilshemius was simply an inept artist or, rather—more interesting nowadays—a very good, intentionally bad artist. But perhaps this is a distinction without a difference. He has been championed by such diverse figures as Jeff Koons, Louise Nevelson, and Ed Ruscha. If you can look past his manifest clumsiness, you may find that Eilshemius's images are full of charm. Certainly I can. He is a true original.

Bob Thompson (1937 – 1966) was an African-American who drew inspiration from European Old Master art and from jazz. A heroin addict, he died young in Rome. His *Charles I* (1965) quotes Anthony van Dyck's famous portrait of that monarch; his *The Milky Way* (1964) is an adaptation of Jacobo Tintoretto's painting of that title, while *Untitled (Nativity)* (1961) takes its design from the Piero della Francesca *Nativity* in the National Gallery in London. But if his compositions come from the Old Masters, his high-pitched, flat coloring is a distinctive product of modernism. Thompson flattens and simplifies his images, as if a steamroller had run over the figures and pressed them into the landscape backgrounds. Had these pictures been painted in 1908, he could have been identified as an eccentric follower of Henri Matisse and André Derain, a Fauve who took his subjects from the museum. Now of

course, thanks to the liberating demise of historicist ways of thinking about the history of modernism, we are ready to appreciate the marvelously inventive way that he uses intense pure color to achieve decorative effects.

Both parts of this exhibition of fifteen small paintings by Eilshemius and twenty-two by Thompson are very interesting. And both challenge our received ideas of modernism. But what's puzzling is the conjunction of these two figures. Why, exactly, are they set together in one relatively small gallery—and how are we to understand the baffling title of the show, *Naked at the Edge*? Both artists show some female nudes, but why say *on the edge*? It's true that both Eilshemius and Thompson were manifestly eccentric, for both were out of tune with their times, but in truth they really have little to do with one another. At their best (or worst) Eilshemius' paintings would not be out of place in a thrift shop. Thompson, however, was a highly skilled painter, marginal only because he was radically out of place in the 1960s American art world. If only he had lived another twenty years to see the revival of figurative painting, he would have fit right in.



Louis M. Eilshemius, *Untitled (Love Bather)*, 1917. Oil on paperboard mounted to Masonite, 41 1/4 × 40 1/2 inches. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

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1. Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (MIT Press, 1996), 109-10.

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#### CONTRIBUTOR

David Carrier

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#### RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



INCONVERSATION

## CLIFFORD ROSS with Phong Bui

JUL-AUG 2015 | ART

On the occasion of his multiple exhibits, including a major mid-career survey at MASS MoCA, the artist Clifford Ross welcomed *Rail* publisher Phong Bui to his West Village studio to discuss his life, work, and more.

## Words for Art

by Barbara Rose

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