

REALISM AND THE NEW IDEAL



A dialogue between Robert Dickenson and David Ligare

Robert Dickenson: As a warm-up, what would you say is the opposite of art?

David Ligare: Oh. I would say that the opposite of art is ignorance. Beyond the technical aspects of making art, there is a language that allows us to truly see a work. All art exists within a structure of critical and historical knowledge that is constantly evolving and being reevaluated - just like language itself. For example, when I was teaching I would make a drawing on the board and ask the class to identify it. It was very clear and precise but no one ever guessed correctly that it was the Japanese character for rain. My point was that art, all art from ancient to contemporary, is a language and unless you understand the vocabulary you can't really see it. Moreover, the language keeps shifting, inventing and then reinventing itself. That said, I am probably wrong in accepting as much of the contemporary art world as I do. Much of it is way too clichéd at this point.

RD: Would you say that there are critics and curators today who can't see your work or the work of other Realists?

DL: Absolutely, if you read Artforum or visit the Whitney Biennial or the Basel Art Fair there are almost no straight-away representational works. Despite the extreme diversity of methods and styles, representation is barely represented, it's just not in vogue right now, despite the fact that Realism is the foundation for our own modernity!

RD: You've been making paintings based on history for many years now, how do you see yourself, then, fitting in to the art of our own time?

DL: I don't fit in but, because I know the history of modern and contemporary art pretty well - I used to teach it - I become part of it simply by way of my knowledge and awareness of it. Does that make sense? I pay attention to it because it's interesting and because it's good to know your competition. By competition I mean competing philosophies rather than products. But I also think that despite our differences, there are things to learn from contemporary art just as there are things to learn from life. I also believe that the true purpose of art is to fulfill societal needs and, while modern art had much to teach us earlier on, like almost all art movements, it's become repetitive and superficial and has basically been feeding off of itself. I believe that what we need now is an art that is skillfully representational and that is not fixed to the present but is historically fluid and flexible. The great early Renaissance architect and artist, Filippo Brunelleschi looked back over a thousand years at the art and architecture of ancient Rome and from those ruins he helped to create a new modernity.

RD: Yes, but, we're modern in a different way today. The Poet, T.S. Eliot once wrote that "it is exactly as wasteful for a poet to do what has been done already as it is for a biologist to rediscover Mendel's discoveries." As a realist don't you sometimes feel like this has been done so often and for so long, why bother with it? Why bother to reinvent the wheel?

DL: Well, strictly speaking, I'm not a Realist, I'm a Classicist and the two are mutually exclusive, but I take your point about originality. Eliot was a great, maybe THE great, modernist poet but remember, he also wrote an essay on tradition and its role in art. And, just as you say, we're modern in a different way than we were in the late middle ages, the traditional is now different too. What is often called "traditional" is often a form of (naïve or uninformed) contemporary Realism. Eliot's form of tradition meant the full knowledge and use of history. Eliot was an "eternalist", he begins his poem The Four Quartets by saying, "Time present and time past/ are both perhaps present in time future." More importantly for me, his poem, Burnt Norton, especially the part beginning with "At the still point of the Turning world," exactly echoes the work of one of my greatest influences, the Greek Sculptor, Polykleitos. Nearly everything that I've done for the past thirty years or more has been aimed at finding the center or "the still point" within the swirl of time and culture. Most contemporary artists are straining to be "edgy." "Predictably quirky" is how one critic put it. That said, I do agree that originality is important, if only for the sake of change and fashion, but we have to ask ourselves, what IS originality? When there are thousands of neo-expressionists, thousands of conceptual and installation artists, thousands of eccentric-abstractors and thousands of every category that you might find in the most current graduate school programs and in the pages of Artforum magazine. The so-called "edge" in the artworld is a very crowded place.

No, the truth is that originality is no longer original, or as the comedian, Lily Tomlin said, "What do you do when everyone's marching to a different drummer." Compared to the so-called avant garde artists of today, the early modernists were a brave breed apart, we have to admire them tremendously. They were working in a climate where gallerists and curators weren't hanging around like drug dealers at the school gates to capture the next "new" thing. I would say that the contemporary art world today is much more like the Paris Salon of the nineteenth century than the world of the early moderns. But that said, I still enjoy looking at contemporary art in galleries and museums and fairs. It can be intellectually interesting, amusing and sometimes very beautiful. It's good to be watchful and alert, but for the

true explorers, it's a good time to look again at the past for some permanence in a very impermanent world. Also, as I've said many times, making art is a matter of solving problems and originality doesn't necessarily matter when you're dealing with more serious issues.

RD: What would you call a serious issue?

DL: A serious issue is creating a culture that believes in something solid. Let's look at Giotto for example, Giotto recovered a style of naturalism that better illustrated the stories of the bible but also created a belief in the beauty of the natural world which led to a greater desire for truth in the sciences, history and other knowledge-based practices. The fourteenth century writer, Boccaccio, wrote that Giotto "brought back to light that art which had for many ages lain buried beneath the blunders of those who painted rather to delight the eyes of the ignorant than to satisfy the intelligence of the wise."

RD: That may have been true for the fourteenth century but I don't buy it for today. Today it's the ignorant who prefer so-called Realist art and it's the educated who crowd the Museum of modern Art in New York or the Tate Modern in London.

DL: Yes, this is true, and huge numbers of people flocked to the nineteenth century salons in Paris. It's a more a matter of what is fashionable and popular, being modern or hip is a great attraction right now, but Realism has played a big part in this situation.

RD: How so?

DL: Technically speaking, Realism with a capital "R" comes to us by way of Gustave Courbet. He declared himself a Realist and then made the point that art should be about the ordinary world immediately around us rather than the salon paintings of gods and angels, etc. His greatest works, the Burial at Ornans or the Stone Breakers were about the ironic tension between the extreme size and care in his depictions of banal subject-matter. His Realism also created the idea that, in order to be valid, art needed to be transgressional. I think we owe the whole of the art of the twentieth century to Gustav Courbet!

RD: Do you really think so? What about abstraction, artists like Mondrian and Kandinsky or Dadaists like Duchamp?

DL: Yes, well, I believe that they were all realists in their way. Mondrian wrote a long essay called "*Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*" in which he argues that natural appearances veil the deeper underlying structure. He wanted to create a truth about nature that was greater than the mere details. He sought the universal rather than the specific. He said that, "we have to transform natural appearance, precisely in order to see nature more perfectly." His sense of order suggests to me very orderly things like time and measure and even gravity. These basic elements are as real as the leaves on a tree. Mondrian was a profound thinker and his paintings are a language unto themselves. He was a great artist.

As for Duchamp, by choosing real objects rather than depictions of objects he ironically one-upped the Realism of the American Ashcan School of artists like Robert Henri, Bellows, Glackens and others. He challenged the definition of art itself. He separated out the idea from the making and also alerted us to the potential beauty of real life around us. Like

Mondrian, Duchamp enters into a Platonic dialogue that says that the idea is the most important aspect of a work. For Plato, any imitation removes us from the truth, which for him was the *idea* of the actual thing. I personally don't think that Plato's argument against imitation is about imitation, per se. I think that it's an argument against the imitation of ordinary reality - the commonplace - exactly the kind of ordinary reality that Courbet and others were promoting. It's the argument that you often hear, that art should be a reflection of the times or of 'real' life - a mirror held up to reality, etc. The truth is, too much looking in the mirror is not a good thing. Whether by way of Realism or Modernism or any mixture, too much looking in the mirror is narcissism.

RD: So, if you are, as you say, a classicist and you believe in Plato then how do you justify your own highly representational if not Realist work?

DL: Well, the truth is that I don't believe in everything that Plato (or Socrates) says. But I think that we're not really *meant* to believe everything. Plato's Republic is an exercise in agile thinking. One of the most important lessons from the ancient Greeks is to be able to hold two opposing opinions at the same time and then to be able to explore and even defend each if need be. For instance, believing thoroughly in the redemptive possibilities of idealistic representation, as I do, while, at the same time, understanding the value of the most so-called "radical" art of the past two centuries - the centuries that define who we are.

But coming back to a narrow definition of Realism, the, shall we say, tender reproducing of the ordinary world around us. It can be beautiful and revealing to see the mirror held up to reality but Plato's goal for his ideal city (in The Republic) was to create extraordinary people and he felt that that was not accomplished by imitating ordinary things or ordinary people. I can't tell you how often I've read reviews of exhibitions where the writer says that so-and-so's work is unusual or refreshing because she or he shows us the world as it is, warts and all, rather than an idealized world, as if this was something original. It's a huge cliché!

RD: Yes, but is not the critic admiring an honesty about the work?

DL: Honesty can be a very short-term practice. It's better to be involved in a high fiction than in low honesty - unless, of course, we're talking about religion.

RD: Let's stay with art, can we? Isn't there a danger of authoritarianism in Plato's Republic and in Classicism in general?

DL: Yes there is, actually, and people have taken it in that direction - the brief but horrible period of European Fascism for instance. Many, however, confuse the words authority and authoritarianism. There is a much richer history of Greco-Roman classicism countering authoritarianism than promoting it, say the European humanists challenging Christian dogma in the 14th and 15th centuries and the revolutionaries confronting the crowns in America and France. Think of Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia, for instance, or Jacques Louis David's "*Oath of the Horatii*" these are neo-classical masterpieces and they draw on the great foundational languages of ancient Greece and Rome yet they were made over two millennia after the fact. Those who say that it's not possible to revisit the past or that it has to be dressed up to look modern are just plain wrong. The great and influential 16th century French artist, Nicolas Poussin never once painted a current event or a person dressed in contemporary clothes. And yet, people drew meaning from his

work that, with the use of a little of their own imagination, could be applied to their own lives. In the 19th century when historicism had been exhausted there was a demand that art must be about the contemporary – meaning Realism. As they loudly proclaimed, "one must be of one's own times." That proclamation itself has now become exhausted. It's time to reconsider history again.

RD: Yes, well, that said, I'm not entirely convinced that this can be done in this day and age - to revisit the past like Poussin or David. There are too many obstacles within our own modernness that prevent it. Too often the sincere artist ends up with pastiche or, worse, kitsch. It's virtually impossible to suspend belief and seriously accept models dressed in togas.

DL: I agree, it's very, very difficult and I can't claim never to have wandered over the border into kitsch myself. I knew when I began my project that making paintings of people in historical clothes was very problematic. That was one of the reasons I did it. It was dangerous, it was totally against the art laws. And thirty years on, it's still is challenging. How to see outside the gravity of our own time has occupied me greatly. As I said, Realism in its many forms is part of the reflection of self. I have very consciously tried to make paintings that are neither self-expressive nor self-referential (to the extent that that's possible). What I have tried to do is to make paintings that are abstracted by time rather than style and that illustrate stories that might have some contemporary application as well. I'm sure that all recurrent classicists have done the same. As I have said many times, the Greeks absorbed something from all of the cultures that they came into contact with, the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, the Minoans, even the Persians, creating in the process an enormously inclusive rather than exclusive ideal. Consequently, This "fullness "or "wholeness" has been able to inform almost every succeeding century. Whether we like it or not, the model for the very way we think in the western world, our very psychology, was established by the Greeks 2500 years ago!

RD: There have been many artists in recent years who have applied classical elements to their work. I'm thinking of, say, Carlo Maria Mariani, Herman Albert or Nancy Spero. At one point they were being called Post-Modernists but, of course, now Post-Modernism has a broader meaning. So, how have you gone about applying Classical ideals to your work?

DL: There have not been so many of those artists, really. Most of the post-modernists you're talking about were using classicism or tradition ironically. But when I began thinking about using Greco/Roman Classicism and narrative I didn't know anyone who was using it. Since the Second World War it was totally off-limits. I had no idea what I had gotten myself into when I began. I had zero education in the Classics. I simply began to read, visit the sites and look in the museums. One of the earliest realizations for me was that the essence of Classicism is balance- the balance between opposing forces - Say, Apollonian order and Dionysian chaos. I learned later that in 1872 Nietzsche had written a long essay about this called, *The Birth of Tragedy*. In it he describes this duality as the "primal unity."

That said, I wanted to make paintings that had a wholeness about them and I discovered that very often whole systems have been described as thirds. Aristotle wrote that "The whole is tripartite, it contains a beginning a middle and an end." Plato, in "The Laws," described a work of art as consisting of mimetic correctness, usefulness and attractiveness. For myself, I decided that I wanted my paintings to contain the elements of structure, surface and content. This, of course,

created an argument for me between the number two and the number three. Which was the true essence of classicism, the balance between two opposing forces or the combination of three interlocking elements? The answer came for me from an engraving by Albrecht Durer of a nude woman and a satyr sitting on the ground, a nude man - probably Hercules - holding his club to fend off a blow to the Dionysian couple by a robed female. Although it's not known what all of the symbols in the Durer image represent, it's generally thought that this is his version of the choice of Hercules between Virtue and Vice.

RD: But that theme as it was presented by Prodicus, as I recall, was the young Hercules being presented with the choice between an easy and happy life of pleasure and a difficult but ultimately heroic life.

DL: Yes, and this is what I mean by the timelessness of recurrent classicism, we all face these choices in our lives. But I think that the idea of choosing one or the other is false. If the essence of classicism is balance, we have to embrace both pleasure and virtue. It's the solution to the argument between the number two and the number three, the third integer creates the whole and maintains the balance, the "primal unity."

RD: That sounds like a compromise rather than a distinction.

DL: Compromise IS a distinction. It goes along with what I said about being able to hold two opposing views at the same time. But, but, I'm not really talking here about art which is either easy or difficult. The most laborious representation can be, as Goethe put it, nothing in the end but "empty realism" and the most minimal abstraction, say, can have a profound and spiritual presence about it. No, there's nothing inherently wrong with any of the modern methods or styles it's just that they have become totally accepted and expected and academic within the art establishment.

RD: You said that before. What else can art be, then, if not what it's been for the past hundred and fifty years and by way of the various realisms you've described?

DL: The deeper function of art and culture is to fulfill societal needs. Very early on its function was probably to honor the animals being hunted by painting respectful and observant images of them on cave walls. They were not decorations, they were meant either to give thanks or to please the gods of the hunt. What we need more than anything else at this period is a renewed desire for knowledge, "desire" being the operative word. I don't ultimately have the answer to your question. I have felt that it would be useful to return to Greco-Roman classicism because the Greeks most particularly were so intensely curious about every aspect of the world around them. Pericles described Athens in its golden age as "cultivating refinement without extravagance and knowledge without softness." We need that kind of inspiration again. The Egyptians not-with-standing, the Greeks brought into focus the full depth and complexity of the human mind and hand. They created the origins of western thought. Theirs' is an entirely different and more profound kind of originality than simply doing something that no one else has done.

So, to answer your question, "what else can art be?" I've written before about the "tragic function" of art. That is, how to see deep into the proud and vulnerable heart of the world. Realism as it is most often practiced today subverts that by keeping us attached to the mere appearance of things. Realism in all its various manifestations has caused us to be fatally fascinated by our own reflections. I would rather see artists searching for something more universal and

timeless, maybe defining what Eliot called "the presence of the past." But what is most important is creating an art that inspires our society to once again wish to imitate not just appearances but excellence itself - the innate excellence of the human spirit that the Greeks called "*arete*."

RD: But what would this, let's say, anachronistic art look like?

DL: Well, I'd like to think that it would somehow look like what I have been attempting to do for the past thirty-plus years but that's too self-serving an answer. You're saying "anachronistic" in a slightly snarky and ironic way. Irony is to Modern art what sentimentalism was to the salon-art of the 19th Century. Some of the artists I admire most were anachronistic; Brunelleschi, Poussin, J.L. David, etc. Escaping the gravity of our own times is going to take a much bigger leap of imagination than any of the programmatically eccentric or predictably transgressive art of today has shown. I think that it will be highly representational because the process, what I call "perceptual analysis" requires that the artist ask him or herself rational questions about looking at nature very carefully, analyzing it and then reproducing it

Content-wise, really radical art needs to reject nearly everything being done today from purposefully obscure word-works to "provocative" installations to intentionally "bad" paintings or videos and also to sweetly naive still lifes, landscapes and figures. What is needed now is a new ideal promoting the realization that we can't meet the challenges of the future by being ordinary, ironic or cynical. I fully believe that every population, no matter what ethnic or racial makeup has the potential for doing extraordinary things – if they are so inspired. We have seen that very early peoples made art which was highly skilled and observant and filled with a sense of the importance of a correctness (*orthotes* in Greek). A belief that art could be metaphysical in a way that it hasn't been recently, meaning that it has the power to transform life.

So, I would say that the new art would have to counter and to contradict almost every aspect of what we now call "contemporary art." It should find a new way to engage with history and to have, as Eliot said a "simultaneous order." It needs to enlarge us by way of our sense of our place in time and to prepare us for the challenges of the future. More than anything, our art and our culture needs to create the renewed desire for knowledge. This is the new challenge, the new ideal and the new modernity.

Florence, Italy 2011