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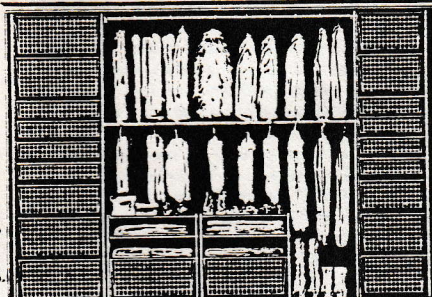
Beyond Good and Evil: The Art Of Roger Herman

by Hunter Drohojowska



Roger Herman's *Vater, Mutter*.

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Neo-Expressionism, so-called, is one of the most rampant, controversial, and successful developments in art of the last decade. It is also the least understood. For one thing, it is a misnomer, being neither "neo" nor "expressionist." As loose figural painting technique cropped up in one country after another — Germany, Italy and America — the term "Neo-Expressionism" came into vogue. It seems the chaos of art is forever being shoehorned into "isms." However, in the rush to define this new art, inconvenient contradictions were simplified and critical confusion resulted.

Roger Herman is in just such a dilemma. He is German, he paints expressively, and he adamantly rejects the label of Neo-Expressionism. "The term 'Neo-Expressionism' is an insult. It's wrong. It's a more complex, much deeper phenomenon," he states. "In the 1960s they called Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol Neo-Dadaists, but they weren't. It's the same error. Expressionism has a big belief in immediate romanticism, spilling your guts and desires out and making them art. For me, Expressionism is like a hippie movement, singing about how bad life in the world is. What is being called 'Neo-Expressionism' is not about those personal mythologies. Those are just the departure points in the paintings."

Herman's canvases are enormous and torrential, fat layers of paint slapped on with house-painting brushes. The strokes are hard and fast, disdainful of dainty delicacies, building up images of poten-

tial emotion. The subject matter of Herman's paintings could be considered traditionally sentimental: love, as seen in the paintings entitled *Father, Mother* and *Big Fuck Painting*; heroism, as reflected in the woodcuts of American Indians or the paintings of the revolutionary *Marat*, and in the heroic landscapes such as *Mountain* or *Ocean*. It all sounds rather expressionist, yet these paintings are frigid and withholding, as distant as a newspaper photograph of a tragedy. The paintings tease, inviting and then denying emotional response.

"When I paint my parents," explains Herman referring to *Father, Mother*, "I paint them heroically. But we all know that our parents are not as great as we think they are when we're children. So I paint from photographs where they are in a pose so there's an irony involved. Dealing with parents is a personal problem, but I don't want to bore anybody so I project the images to get a certain emotional distance. I mean, you paint any subject from a certain personal love but that love is not enough!"

The painting described by Herman is 10 by 13 feet of black, white and red paint depicting a man and a woman embracing. It's a powerful, moving work, but the viewer's appreciation derives from the formal force of the paint surface rather than the narrative of the scene. The sense that these are artist's parents, hugging one another, is totally absent.

Herman continues, "I think what is irritating to people about my paintings is that personal warmth with a cold distance. Yet, our generation is like that



We can't find the title but you get the idea.

We have certain feelings, but we are hard about those feelings. It is an interesting tension between cynicism, hope and desire. It's like the punks, sort of despairing of life but also so romantic. It's multi-layered because we have so much information to deal with." As an example, Herman cites the movie *Spartacus*. "I've seen the movie 13 times and I still cry. It's stupid and I know it but it's one of those sources of information that we have, one of the small truths that remain."

Herman, 35, studied art on scholarship at Karlsruhe Akademie Der Kunst. He describes the school as conservative, in the backwoods of Germany, where the students were expected to study painting. This was during the early 1970s when schools that were more in the mainstream were conducting funeral rites for the medium. Herman says that he chose Karlsruhe for its nearly medieval system of pairing a student to one teacher in a way that allowed the student almost complete freedom for six years. "You were on your own from the beginning. There was no drawing class where a teacher would tell you what to do. It was incredibly competitive and neurotic and we had a lot of suicides."

In 1976, Herman received a grant from the German academy exchange (D.A.A.D.) to come to America. Herman selected the city of San Francisco because of his interest in Bay Area figurative painters such as Richard Diebenkorn and Elmer Bischoff. He arrived only to discover that the movement had all but disappeared. "In San Francisco, I didn't know anyone of my generation who was doing what I liked. They were all doing decorative work."

Still, Herman stayed in San Francisco until 1981 when he moved to Los Angeles and soon was represented by the Ulrike Kantor Gallery. By this time, other German painters labeled "Neo-Expressionists" were receiving critical attention internationally — Georg Baselitz and Markus Lupertz, a generation older than Herman, and Walter Dahn and Georg Jiri Dokoupil, who are younger. However, Herman's development owes more to the "anti-painting" of Gerhard Richter. "I think anti-painting is very misunderstood in America. It's a painting that tried to overcome traditional forms, that didn't want to please. It's a painting against the demands of being successful, of having clarity." Herman adds, "German painting was ignored after the war so a new painting could develop. The art scene

went from internationalism to regionalism. It was less involved with 'peinture' in the traditional sense and it became more interested in philosophical content."

Herman's work followed these influences. "At first, I was dealing with problems which weren't problems but I didn't know that then. I was still concerned with value and tone, background and foreground, traditional painting issues. Then I became interested in the intellectual quality of the anti-painting. I'm part of a common understanding that sees painting as a certain philosophic or moral attempt to use painting as a language, crude, rough, conceptual and combined with irony. I think of a statement made by Mulheimer Freiheit, a group of painters in Cologne: 'Nothing new on the Western front but we still continue to paint.'"

This ideal of working free of history further clarifies Herman's opposition to the term "Neo-Expressionism." "As Nietzsche wrote, it is 'beyond good and evil.' Right and wrong are one thing. I can do a painting about content or a painting about paint. We don't have a culture of a single belief. Good paintings are not understandable, they don't tell you what is right or wrong. The point of art is breaking rules. Not just as a protest but as a necessity to overcome fixed positions. It's important to work against your own talent." The artist concludes, "Actually, I just love to paint and I want all the qualities of that available. I want to be a pop-expressionist-color field painter. Isn't that a little more involving than just 'expressing' my personal desires?"

The announcement poster to Herman's most recent show, which continues at the Ulrike Kantor Gallery through November 15, features a woodcut self-portrait of Herman. On his head, attached like a coal miner's head lamp, is a palette and brush. It's an amusing, revealing self-analysis: the painter employing his art as searchlight, no doubt seeking some truth. It is an educated, intellectual art that stands skeptical of both traditional and avant-garde belief systems. Herman's art is founded in doubt about the value of art and its role in Western civilization. He sees himself as part of a larger movement of artists, but not when they are called "Neo-Expressionists."

"We are fast painters," observes Herman. "As my dealer noted, we want to 'paint another picture before the world blows up.' We look back, we look forward, but always with a consciousness of the present." ■

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