

Art

The Ultimate Ironic Time

Art's New Order

by Hunter Drohojowska

A cartoon in the New Yorker: an artist stands in his studio, the gun pointed towards his head. His wife is walking through the door and blandly says, "It's been done."

A press release for a show of Richard Prince's photograph quotes the modernist poet Ezra Pound: "Make it new." Then quotes the post-modernist artist: "Make it again."

We're at the end of the Modernist Age. Exhausted after some 120 years of formal innovation, it seems that the artist's wife might be right. It's been done. This is the pressure affecting the contemporary artist.

You see it in the galleries and the art magazines: pictures painted in every style, using every device, borrowing resources from popular as well as fine art. Images from TV, film, kitsch design, illustration, advertising, graffiti, from ethnic or modern art, from the '50s, the '60s; all are blatantly plagiarized, used with ironic awareness of the original sources. Original creation is now associated with the deteriorating modernist condition. And so, unable to pose as "original," the post-modernist borrows.

Irony is a dominating attitude among the younger artists. They grab any style, maybe more than one, use it in their art but distance themselves from the consequences by claiming ironic intention. The model for this role is Andy Warhol, who could claim a stack of Brillo boxes as his art.



Weitenschauung, Constance Mallinson. Pastel on paper.

Irony is the conflict of two meanings, the separation of appearance and reality. Art is ironic when its style, or image, is divorced from the original purpose. The Brillo boxes become sculpture.

Roger Herman borrows the style of the German Expressionists to paint pictures of heroic romance portraits of Vincent Van Gogh, for instance — but he works from slides rather than angst, and the canvases are emotionally arid. Alexis Smith combines references from movie posters, song lyrics, and slogans — the diversity of popular culture is ironically reconstituted

for sale as fine art. In the latest work of Constance Mallinson, fragments of the visual language of landscape painting are woven together with cliché scenes from picture postcards. David Salle paints from a photograph of women in black lingerie, adds the name "Tennyson," superimposes a squiggly cartoon of what might be the author and a few rectangles of "pure" color to acknowledge the minimalists.

What does such a confluence of styles signify? A denial that any single style can have primacy. From the post-modern perspective, all imagery is fodder, legitimized by an ironical attitude.

Critic Joseph Mashek struck the heart of the matter in discussing the sudden efflorescence of commercial galleries run by artists in New York's East Village. "It really doesn't boil down to a fashion of any one type. We have a younger generation. Minimalism is history to them. What they're doing can't be reduced to Neo-Expressionism or graffiti. They have an ironical attitude toward style. They're aware of the headlong rush from style into fashion and they protect themselves with irony. It's not exclusively visual. It's art about art, which means that it's about the



Van Gogh and Landscape, Roger Herman. Oil on canvas.

artworld and the rest of the world. Mainly, it's about sophistication."

Sophistication is the appropriate term here: refined, worldly, the opposite of naive. How did this come to be the norm?

The last government census found that one percent of the U.S. populace listed themselves as "professional artists." It's likely that most of them have at least one degree in art. William Rubin, director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, says, "Minimalism was the first art form to come out of the universities rather than the artists' ghetto. This [interest in Minimalism and Conceptualism] can only happen to people who have a historical consciousness." That consciousness has expanded geometrically and produced a critical intelligence among artists.

Today's young artists have watched the acceleration of art history since the 1960s, when they were maybe five or ten years old. They've seen movements of art — Post-Painterly Abstraction, Pop art, Minimal art, Photorealism, Pattern and Decoration — fly by like pages of a calendar, dropping away at high speed, a wipe in an old movie. Each art movement was accompanied by a critical authority — seeking a reputation as a seer — who seized the moment and cried, "This is the new art." Each had its moral prerogative. Each was greeted by a surge in the art market, all wallets opened for the latest fashion. Movements of Earth art, Body art, and Conceptual art evolved as artists took extreme measures to outdistance the voracious market. They de-defined the line between art and life, trying to evade collectors. It never worked. Michael Heizer may have gone far out to the desert to dig his monumental trenches but the boulders still wound up at the ACE gallery in Venice.

The latest generation of artists are savvy, street smart and subversive. Wary of the art market's system of planned obsolescence, they operate under the protec-

tive umbrella of irony. They can work in any style, even change styles, borrow imagery from the Renaissance or "Ozzie and Harriet," without the repercussions of commitment to whatever might be the implied values of the source material.

In addition, artists in the movements of the last 20 years represent the Academy to

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younger artists. In most cases, this is literally true since they were educated by those who worshipped at the altar of Modernism. The young artists are rebelling against the anti-establishment, avant-garde pretensions of the 1960s and 1970s. "Who says I can't paint figures?" they cried, and Neo-Expressionism was born.

Curiously, in the time of Socrates and for the subsequent 20 centuries, irony was used as a dramatic device to reveal absolute values in reality — values

of beauty, goodness, and truth. This philosophical interpretation of irony shifted in the 19th century with the advent of the Industrial Age, when Western societies began to lose faith in values as determined by Christianity or the Classics. The entire modern condition was considered to be ironic — that is, detached from the chaotic, inhuman, unknowable world. Absolute values were now formed in the individual's mind. It came to be accepted that nothing is absolute, everything relative. This provides the core of writings by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Man's faith in the human spirit was no longer buttressed by external conditions and seemingly could only be substantiated in the flux of human existence and in art. If there was no faith in religion, in state, in leaders, at least there was faith in the struggle to create. "Art and nothing but art," wrote Nietzsche. "We have art in order not to die of the truth."

As we enter the Electronic Age, we still expect art to bolster our faith in the human spirit. Our artists labor to be equal to the task. But they create in oppressive times, not only trying to survive the brazenly commercial art world, but trying to survive, period. They create in the shadow of a nuclear threat, in an era uniquely insecure about the future. Ironic detachment has characterized this art of the last century, but those artists felt they were speaking to coming generations. When art is not expected to affect the future, it is necessarily topical, rooted in the eternal present. There's a carousel effect: lights, noise, motion, action — locked in a perpetual circle.

Values commonly associated with certain styles and images have been leveled by the push of post-modernism. If nothing means anything, then everything means

The standard for irony in modern art was set in the 19th century when Edouard Manet painted *Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe*. He borrowed from the historic ideal of Giorgione and Raphael to represent a crassly real nude at a picnic with two fully clothed gentlemen, unintentionally scandalizing the bourgeois Academy of Paris. Michael Brenson wrote that Manet was the "modernist Adam . . . the painter who sold the argument that the past could only remain viable in the modern world if it were treated as candidly, as critically, and as curtly as an old friend."

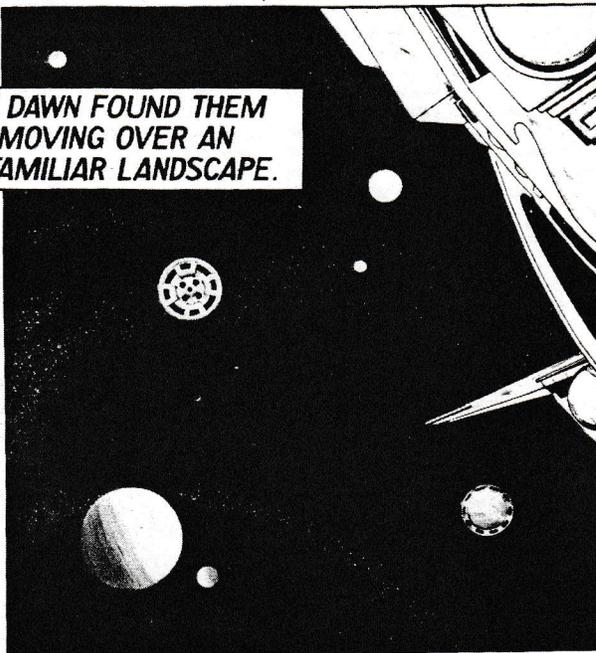
That might have been written about the post-modern artists as they antagonize modernists in their attempts to get closer to the epicenter of contemporary existence.

Art is a way of making us see the world anew. What the post-modernists do by representing images and styles from a wide array of sources is to infuse them with fresh meaning. "Making it again," as Richard Prince says, is making it new.

Consider: Prince re-photographs Marlboro ads and presents them as his art; Lari Pittman composes paintings of chintzy wallpaper and fabric motifs; Jeffrey Vallance makes imitation Tikis and represents the culture of the South Sea islands; Jim Isermann's '50s-styled furniture in turquoise and pink could have been lifted from a motel room; David Amico alters his borrowed styles from painting to painting; William Leavitt draws formal suburban landscapes that look like magazine illustrations; Michael Kelley rants and rambles about life, art, commerce, politics, sex in deadpan performances that simulate the insecurity of contemporary existence.

This art seems to be made in the spirit of an archaeological expedition, a search for meaning by sifting through the ar-

THE DAWN FOUND THEM
MOVING OVER AN
UNFAMILIAR LANDSCAPE.



Satan's Satellites, Alexis Smith. Mixed media.

something. Art now has become absolute relativism at a fever pitch, and subject to the Hegelian critique that it demonstrates no commitment to anything at all. For the future requires commitment, and we are constantly reminded how tentative that possibility may be.

In this atmosphere, artists become cynical about the potential of invention, of creating something new, and they turn to selection and assign new values to what already exists.

tifacts of contemporary culture. The values are relative and the scene is generally unstable, but the artists don't look to the future. They're trying to find significance in the here and now.

In 1913, the American philosopher Randolph Bourne wrote about an ironical attitude that applies today: "Paradoxical irony compares things not with an established standard but with each other, and values slowly emerge in the process." I think we are now in that process. ■

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