

Picturing with Paint

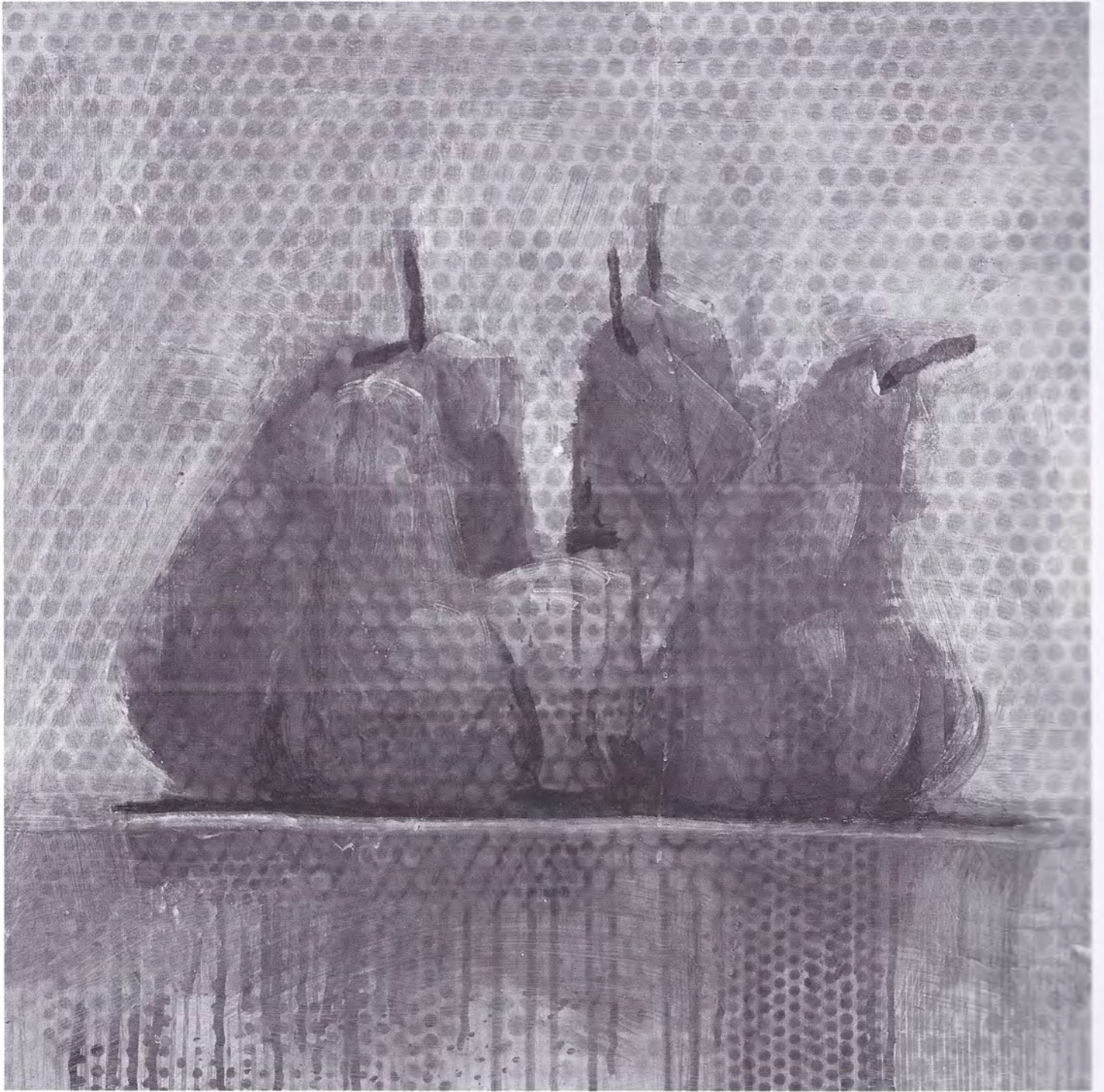
by GERRY KISIL

The genealogies of Les Thomas' paintings are rooted in their historical affiliations or resonance — not in their origins. When we begin to examine these affiliations, we can't help but notice, "...the myriad [of] events through which — thanks to which, against which — they are formed" (Foucault 1977, 146). I am talking about the affiliations that appropriate the techniques, forms, and social significance of various visual media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the artist's vision. As Thomas' work points out, a medium, any medium, can never operate in isolation; it must enter into relationships of respect and rivalry with all other media.

It is interesting to note that at this particular moment in time we find ourselves in a unique position to appreciate these relationships because of rapid developments in communication technologies and the almost as rapid reaction to them from traditional media. Older electronic and print media are seeking to reaffirm their status within our culture at the very same time that digital media is challenging that status. Both old and new media are invoking the twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy in their efforts to reinvent themselves and subsequently shift the significance of each other. The desire for immediacy leads digital media to borrow from each other as well as their analog predecessors such as film, television and photography. Whenever one medium seems to have convinced viewers of its immediacy, other media try to appropriate that conviction.

Remediation did not begin with the introduction of digital technology. We can identify the same processes at work throughout the last several hundred years of Western visual representation. Paintings, photographs and computer imaging systems all attempt to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation. All of them enlist the science of perception in order to place the viewer in the same space as the objects viewed.

This instrumentalization of vision has existed since the Renaissance, with the development of linear perspective, but it surfaces in no approach more certainly than in perceptualism. Perceptualism describes image making entirely in terms of perceptions and sensations occurring in the invisible recesses of the painter's and viewer's mind. This concept of image making is called the Perceptualist approach because the essential transaction concerns the eye, and the accommodations the schema must make to new observations which come from the eye.



above, p
right, p



In the Perceptualist account the painter's task is to accurately transcribe perceptions, just as it's the viewer's responsibility to receive those perceptions as sensitively as possible. The painter perceives and the viewer re-perceives, and the form which unites them is a line from the painter's vision, to the viewer's gaze. The image is thought of in this context as a channel, or stream of transmission, from a site dense in perception to another site avid for perception. The viewer is described as confronting the image by mobilizing their own stock of perceptual memories, bringing these memories to the new work for testing, and the visual schema are in turn modified by the encounter between the image and the viewer's gaze.

Power, social and political power, may utilize this channel and its object of perceptual transmission, the image, in various ways and according to its own ends. Power seizes, catches hold of, expropriates and deflects the channel of perception that runs from the painter to the viewer; maybe it enables, supports, maintains, or finances that channel; but, however we view it, power is theorized by the Perceptualists' account as always outside this relay of the image. Power is an external element, and the forcefulness of power is measured by the degree to which it penetrates and overtakes the private transmission of percepts, where the essence of power manifests exactly into its exteriority.

Perceptualists exhaust themselves in a description of image making that omits or brackets the social formation. What Perceptualism leads to is a picture of art in isolation from the rest of society's concerns, since essentially the artist is alone, watching the world as a visual spectacle but never reacting to the world's meanings, recording his perceptions but apparently doing so in some extraterritorial zone, off the social map.

Perceptualism always renders art banal, since its view never lifts above ocular accuracy, and always renders art as trivial, since the making of the image seems to go on, according to Perceptualism, at the margins of social concerns, in some eddy away from the ebb and flow of power. But we don't have to think this way: if we consider painting as an art of the sign, which is to say an art of discourse, then painting is coextensive with the flow of signs through both itself and the rest of the social formation. There is no marginalization: painting is bathed in the same circulation of signs that permeates or ventilates the rest of our social structure.

The point is that Thomas' paintings are also activities of the sign. Our ability to recognize his images neither involves, nor makes necessary inference towards, the isolated perceptual field of the image's creator. It is rather, an ability that presupposes competence within socially constructed codes of recognition. The difference between the term

"I consider the political structure of
the Art world, and the presumed
significance of art itself, to be suspect.
The creation of art has always occurred
in the wake of socio-economic shifts.
It does not precede them."



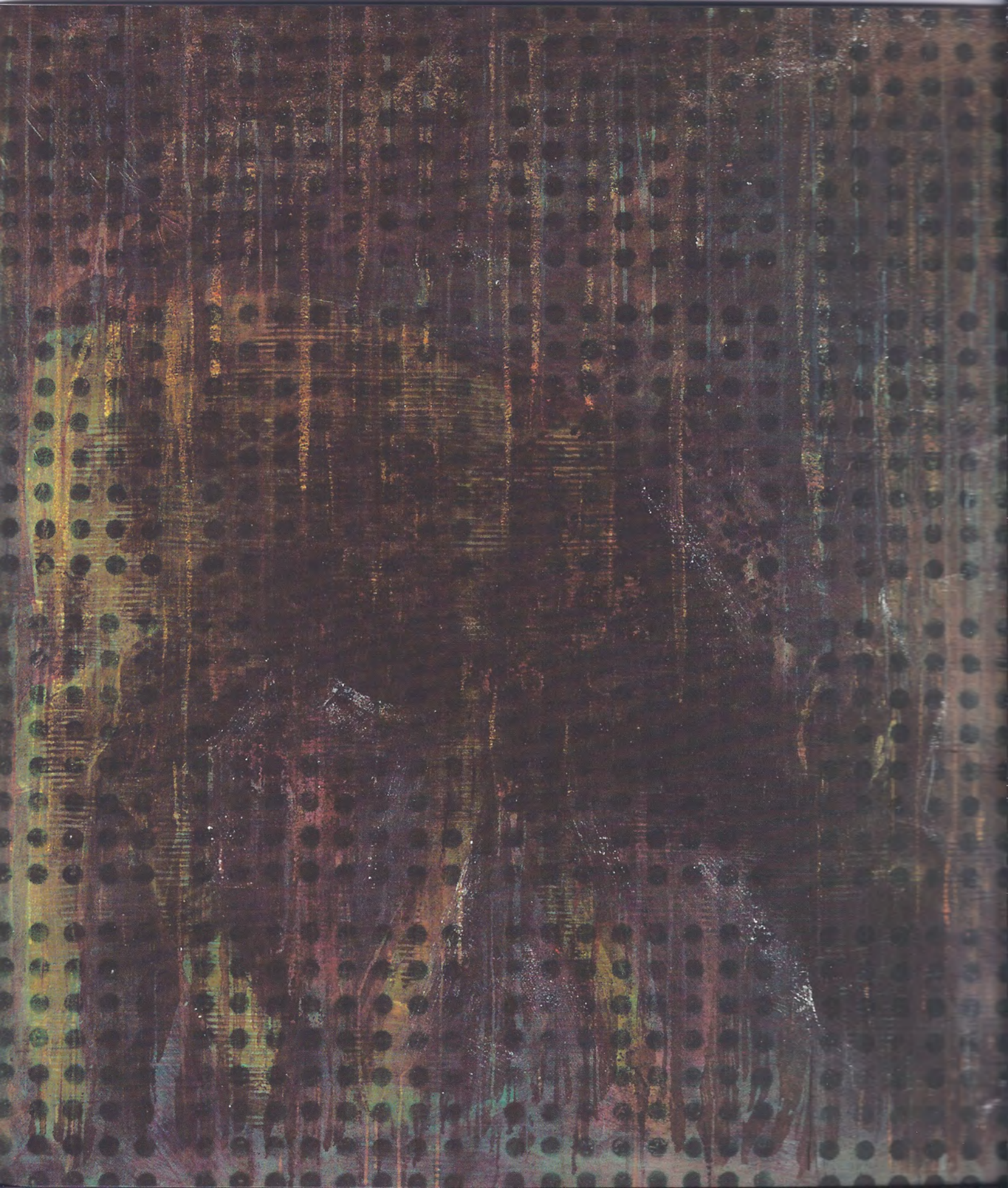
'perception' and the term 'recognition' is that the latter is social. It takes one person to experience a sensation; it takes at least two to recognize a sign. And when people encounter these paintings and recognize what they see, their recognition does not unfold in the solitary recesses of the sensorium but through their activation of human culture. Put another way, in the Perceptualist account the image is said to span an arc that runs from the brush to the retina, an arc of inner vision or perception, the recognition of painting as sign spans an arc that extends from person to person and across inter-individual space.

The rethinking of these pictures as signs, rather than perceptions, relocations them within a field of power from which they were excluded. In place of the transcendental comparison between the image and perceptual private worlds, stand the socially generated codes of recognition; and in place of the link, magical and illogical, that is alleged to extend from an outer world of things into recesses of inwardness and subjectivity, stands the link extending from individual to individual as consensual activity, in the forum of recognition. The social formation isn't something which appropriates or utilizes the image after it has been made: rather painting, as an activity of the sign, unfolds within the social formation from the beginning. The social formation is always present in the image; it is not an external element that addresses the image after the fact.

Since the Renaissance, Jean Baudrillard (1983) contends, the sign has emerged as the dominant language form. Baudrillard characterizes the sign as the increasing separation of signifier and signified. In the twentieth century, he argues that the sign has been replaced by the signal. Thanks to satellites and data flows, the cathode-ray television tube bring each of us the harsh morning light of every new day. Semiologists such as Baudrillard have analyzed the structure of signification in electronic media, stressing the separation of the signifier and its subsequent recoding of commodities. Media promotes this process. Anything can be associated with anything else for a viewing subject who is structured by the rhetoric of the commercial. What Fredric Jameson (1991) terms our current spatial "confusion" may be due in part to the structurally distinct ways in which we are being constituted as subjects in electronically mediated language forms. As Manuel Castells (1983) puts it, we now live not in a space of places but in a space of flows. Unanchored from the space of places and cast into the space of flows, images become ambiguous, revealing a visual poetic that the Surrealists could only imagine but that the vector has now rendered as a philosophy made concrete.

"The reason I employ sub-narrative subject matter is to negate a logical narrative or associative images for mere viewer consumption. Rather, I aim for an encounter with concrete material (oil and wax) and the phenomenology of a picture as becoming object, whereas the image plays the role of a perceptual hinge, swinging between the realm of socially recognisable signs and my own response to the contingent possibilities of ever emerging permutations and combinations of picturing with the above elements."









"I avoid the use of abstract application
as aesthetically charged decorum.
I prefer to throw it into play with signs
and mark making we recognize
amongst the conventions of art and
various media technologies."

In this sense Les Thomas' painted panels are reflections of a very different world; they reorganize physical space into flatness and mobility (lack of a fixed axis). Thomas' attempt to reproduce temporal and spatially mediated reality onto a miniaturized frame is a process that speaks directly to this new reality — the organization of a space that is contingent on its own instrumental representation. Rather than pointing to first-degree references such as objects and events, simulations such as his animal paintings look to existing images and texts for their verisimilitude.

In **Animal Painting # 238** (plate 7) a cinnamon colored bear makes a hasty retreat across a large pixelated square surface. The metallic sheen of the bear's iridescent coat both separates the animal from the stenciled dots that surround it, and alludes to the mechanization of the natural world. In **Animal Painting # 103-2** (plate 5), a large pig is highlighted with several broad brush strokes. This technique works to render the picturing process visible and keeps the subject from disappearing into a densely patterned background. In paintings such as these two examples, spatial and temporal coordinates collapse into a flatness that is no longer defined by depth and volume, but rather by spectacle and repetition. Our senses are skewed by this aesthetic of transparency, simulation and repetition. These panels provide an opportunity to re-think our connection to an increasingly mediate environment. Instead of exploiting these images as reality, Thomas layers and juxtapositions pigments and patterns in order to create surfaces mediating occularcentric regimes of communication.



Among the best known historical illustrations of the science of vision is a woodcut by Albrecht Dürer, entitled, **Unterweysung der Messung**, (1538) in which a draftsman, looking through a framed string grid, dissects his female model while transcribing his observations to paper. The abstract coldness of the artist's clinical stare suggests no emotional involvement with the objects depicted in geometricalized space. The draftsman's desire for immediacy is evident in his gaze, which analyzes and controls, if not possess, the female object. The woodcut suggests that visual technologies of transparent immediacy which are based on linear perspective may be enacting the so-called male gaze, widening the gap between spectator and spectacle, excluding women from full participation as subjects and maintaining them as objects.



"Historically, the female form has been glorified in the High Art of Western painting. In recent times however, cultural research increasingly reveals that the women of these societies generally endured strict social restrictions. Gender difference is a curious concern in our times. On the one hand, it is a topic orbited by politics and power struggles. Conversely, it has a great deal to do with the transitory nature of individual identity. I can only view myself as a certain male within this context."

With the introduction of this technology, transparent immediacy itself could be considered a gendered notion. Martin Jay (1993) has suggested that technical perspective joined with Descartes' philosophical dualism to constitute "Cartesian perspectivalism" — a way of seeing that characterizes Western vision at least until the coming of modernism in the twentieth century. Scientists, Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine Grontkowski (1996) have associated Descartes' dualism with the privileging of the visual and also with Western masculinist science (187-202). They also point out that, "*there is a movement among a number of feminists to sharpen what, until now, had only been a vague sentiment...that the logic of the visual is a male logic. According to Luce Irigaray, what is absent from this logic...is women's desire*" (187). For these feminists, then, the desire for visual immediacy is a male desire that takes on an overt sexual meaning when the object of representation, and therefore desire, is a woman, as in the Dürer woodcut.

Feminists theorists such as Laura Mulvey have delivered powerful critiques of media's incorporation of the male gaze. Mulvey (1989) argues that Hollywood film almost inevitably enacts that way of looking, because the camera work and narrative structure cause the viewers to identify with the male main character and join him in his visual examination of women.

The actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the content and structure of presentation, adding a further layer of significance demanded by patriarchal order... Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself... Cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire (25).

The desire of which Mulvey speaks seems to be what we call the desire for immediacy, which then becomes a male desire to possess, or perhaps to destroy, the female.

It may well be that all technologies of transparent immediacy, including painting, enact a gendered form of looking. On the other hand, visual media can pursue other routes to immediacy. There is the immediacy that comes through hypermediation — an immediacy that grows out of the frank acknowledgement of the medium and is not based on the perfect visual re-creation of the world. In this instance, we do not look through the medium in linear perspective; rather, we look at the medium or at a multiplicity of media that may appear in the fragmented elements of collage or photomontage. We do not maintain the clinical gaze; rather, we glance here and there at the various



"When we look at an image,
and particularly those so emphatically
placed within the parentheses of
a particular medium or media,
we are always looking in tandem with
our previous experiences, accumulated
beliefs, reservations, and of course
ignorance. We never merely look."

manifestations. This immediacy is not based on a desire to control, according to Freud, the desire for immediacy may be a kind of pre-phallic desire to unite with the mother or return to the womb. Even in Lacanian terms, the desire for wholeness — the desire to get back behind the psychic split defined by the mirror stage is something both men and women can feel, although in different ways.

All this suggests a psychosexual interpretation of the dichotomy between transparent immediacy and hypermediacy. Transparent immediacy attempts to achieve through linear perspective a single, "right" representation of things. Linear perspective becomes the normal and normative way of looking at the world, while hypermediacy becomes the sum of all the unconventional, unusual, and in some sense deviant ways of looking. Hypermediacy is multiple and atypical in its suggestion of plurality — a plurality of viewing positions and a multiplicity of relationships to the object in view, including sexual objects. We could argue that linear perspective, which enacts the controlling male gaze, depends on hypermediation, which is in this context defined as an "unnatural" way of looking at the world. In this way hypermediacy is used to justify the immediacy of linear perspective and reinforce the status quo.

Rather than creating yet another perceptual hierarchy, Thomas' paintings, and his choice of subjects, such as the female form in **Bra Painting #008** (Plate 8), acknowledge that it may be more useful to endorse the plurality of existing perceptual regimes. In doing so, he would argue that we see the virtues of differentiated ocular experiences in a relationship of remediations. At the same time, we wean ourselves from the "fiction" of a true vision, and indulge instead in the new possibilities opened up by the scopic regimes that presently exist, not to mention the ones yet to come.

NOTES

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MULVEY, LAURA. **VISUAL AND OTHER PLEASURES**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

QUOTES

From the artist's notebooks.



plate 11

AWARDS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

- 2000-01 Alberta Foundation for the Arts Project Grant
- 1999 Canada Council Travel Grant
- 1999 College Art Association: Travel Grant (Los Angeles, California)
- 1998-99 Alberta Foundation for the Arts Project Grant
- 1998 Governor General's Gold Medal Award: Nominee (University of Calgary)
- 1996-97 Alberta Foundation for the Arts Project Grant
- 1996 Dean's Special Entrance Scholarship (University of Calgary)
- 1994-95 Alberta Foundation for the Arts Project Grant
- 1992-93 Alberta Foundation for the Arts Project Grant
- 1992 Winspear Educational Development Scholarship
- 1992 Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travel Grant
- 1991 British Council Grant (Slade School of Fine Art)
- 1990 Florence Adison Scholarship: Painting (University of Alberta)
- 1990 Universiade Scholarship: Painting (University of Alberta)
- 1990 Alberta Heritage Scholarship: Painting (University of Alberta)
- 1989 Seven Arts Club Award: Painting (University of Alberta)

COLLECTIONS

- Alberta Foundation for the Arts
- Canada Council
- Air Canada
- University of Calgary
- Ranger Oil (London, Eng)
- Alberta House (London, Eng)
- Grant McEwan Community College
- Westin Hotel (Whistler, BC)
- Avenir Capital Corporation (Calgary)
- Shaw Cable
- Nesbitt Burns (Calgary)
- GSL (Milford, England)

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 *Canadian Survey* Udell Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia
- 1999 *Three Young Artists* Masters Gallery, Calgary, Alberta
- 1998 *Nineteen-Ninety-Eight* Nickel Arts Museum, Calgary, Alberta
- 1997 *Neoteric* Beaver House, Edmonton, Alberta (AFA Collection)
- 1997 *Paint-ings* Profiles Gallery, St. Albert, Alberta
- 1996 *Face to Face* Udell Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia
- 1996 *ECAS Exhibition* Strathcona Arts Centre, Edmonton, Alberta
- 1996 *Still Life* McMullen Gallery, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta
- 1996 *40 Degrees Celsius* Commerce Place Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
- 1995 *Introducing...* The Glenbow Museum and Art Gallery, Calgary, Alberta
- 1993 *Four Young Painters* Udell Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia
- 1991 *Real Life: Observed* Harcourt House Public Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta

1962 Born in Vancouver, British Columbia

EDUCATION

- 1996-98 Master of Fine Arts: University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada
- 1991-92 Post-graduate Studies: Slade School of Fine Arts, University College London, London, England
- 1986-90 Bachelor of Fine Arts: University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2001 *Picturing with Paint* Galerie Due, Bochum, Germany
- 2001 *New Work* Canada House, Banff, Alberta, Canada
- 2000 *Photoshop Paintings* Udell Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
- 1998 *Recent Paintings* Masters Gallery, Calgary, Alberta
- 1996 *Illuminated by Color* Medicine Hat Museum & Art Gallery, Medicine Hat, Alberta
- 1995 *Recent Landscapes* Front Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
- 1994 *Still Life Paintings* Front Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
- 1993 *Singular Adventures* GSL Galleries, London, England
- 1992 *Paint-ings by...* Alberta House, London, England
- 1992 *English Landscapes* Front Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
- 1991 *Small Paintings* Front Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta

LIST OF WORKS

All media are oil and waxes on panel.

1
PHOTOSHOP PAINTINGS #120-1-2-3
1999-2000
3 panels
24 x 24 ins each
61 x 61 cms

2
STILL LIFE PAINTING #116
2000
24 x 24 ins
61 x 61 cm

3
ANIMAL PAINTING #257
2000
48 x 48 ins
122 x 122 cm

4
ANIMAL PAINTING #366
2000-2001
48 x 48 ins
122 x 122 cm

5
PHOTOSHOP PAINTING #103-2
1998-1999
48 x 48 ins
122 x 122 cm

6
ANIMAL PAINTING #272
2000
48 x 48 ins
122 x 122 cm

7
ANIMAL PAINTING #238
2000
48 x 48 ins
122 x 122 cm

8
BRA PAINTING #008
1999-2000
48 x 48 ins
122 x 122 cm

9
ANIMAL PAINTING #245
2000
72 x 72 ins
183 x 183 cm

10
ANIMAL PAINTING #240
1999-2000
62 x 62 ins
157.5 x 157.5 cm

11
STILL LIFE PAINTING #057
2000
12 x 12 ins
30 x 30 cm

12
STILL LIFE PAINTING #123
2001
24 x 24 ins
61 x 61 cm

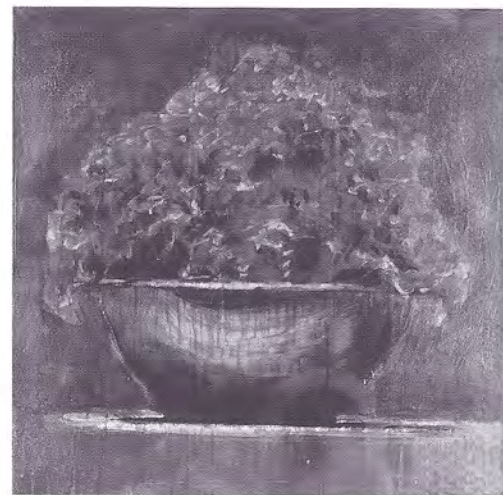


plate 12