

Art issues.

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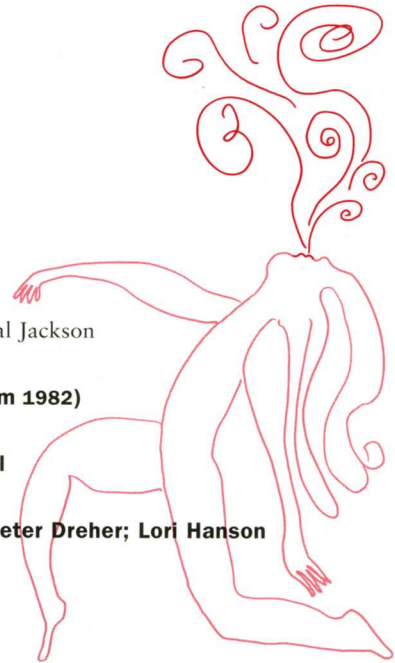
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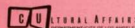
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Cover
(David Pagel's review is on page 49)

Susan Silton
Fig. 13, 1999 (detail)
Chromogenic print mounted on Sintra
47 1/4" x 34"

This page
(Doug Harvey's column begins on page 14)

from The Picture of Health:
Healing Your Life With Art
© 1990 by Lucia Capacchione



Modest

Painting

I'd like to put forward the notion of "modest painting." It won't put itself forward, because it is inherently resistant to the self-commodification actively encouraged by contemporary culture. Perhaps that is why it is useful to begin in a space foreign to our culture, the traditional Japanese toilet accorded an elegiac description by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki in his 1933 artistic and ethno-anthropological manifesto, *In Praise of Shadows*: "The Japanese toilet truly is a place of spiritual repose. It always stands apart from the main building, at the end of a corridor, in a grove fragrant with leaves and moss. No words can describe that sensation as one sits in the dim light, basking in the faint glow reflected from the shoji, lost in meditation or gazing out at the garden."

Through this reference to Tanizaki's toilet, which the author contrasts to the more hygienic but aesthetically and psychologically brutalizing glare of Western-style white-tiled bathrooms, I hope to call attention to a subcategory of Western painting, one whose preference for understatement and reticence has hidden it in plain sight—in the shadows of a culture that denies the existence of any such thing as shadow. By turning down the wattage and amps for a moment and sharpening our perception of images in a softer light, we may find new possibilities for painting.

By definition, the works I am interested in calling attention to don't have big, blinking neon signs announcing, "MODEST PAINTINGS HERE!" So, in trying to define this aesthetic, I have constantly had the sensation of having just overshot a dimly lit driveway along a busy highway. The effort to throw a glimmer of light onto the characteristics of modest painting can be a frustrating experience of *just missing* the small, the unimportant, the anonymous, the private and personal—all that has fallen by the wayside of "progress" at the service of another cause more pressing to the individual artist. You may think, in this regard, of works by artists as diverse as Johannes Vermeer, Jean Baptiste Chardin, Myron Stout, Jack Tworkov, Vija Celmins, Thomas Nozkowski, and others.

Modest painting doesn't aspire to historical importance through the physical domination of the viewer or the room in which it is placed. Despite the importance accorded easel-sized paintings as uniquely marketable objects, large scale as a marker of aesthetic ambition and cultural significance is an integral part of the history of Western painting. Small paintings, when considered in relation to works that dominate architectural space, are often accorded genre status, and it is a commonplace of art theory that genre, including still-life, is a second-class citizen of painting, rendered lesser and feminized for its attention to the quotidian over the mythological and religious, the historical and military.

In *Looking at the Overlooked*, Norman Bryson recalls Charles Sterling's distinction between megalography and rhopography: "Megalography is the depic-

tion of those things in the world which are great—the legends of the gods, the battle of heroes, the crises of history. Rhopography (from *rhopos*, meaning trivial objects, small wares, trifles) is the depiction of things that lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that ‘importance’ constantly overlooks.” Bryson focuses on still-life painting as the genre that “takes on the exploration of what ‘importance’ tramples underfoot,” but even within the history of abstraction, as paintings increased in size towards the architectural, smaller paintings were shifted into this zone of shadows—of anonymity, humility, and modesty.

Enormous size certainly intends to call attention to itself, but modest paintings are not necessarily small, and small paintings are not necessarily modest. The category “modest” also has an emotional quotient: a character of expressive reserve, even if the expressiveness is lyrical rather than stentorian. However, modesty is not synonymous with a lack of rigor or ambition for painting. In fact, modesty may emerge from an artist’s emphasis on rigor or ambition for painting itself rather than for his or her career. The modest painter may submit painting to a ruthless criticality that precludes virtuosity for its own sake, and in so doing risks getting less attention than a painter with fewer scruples about the meaning and integrity of each stroke. But if rigor and ambition are integral to modest painting, they take varied forms, and are written into history in different manners, reinscribing traditional aesthetic and gendered hierarchies even in the consideration and contextualization of paintings that at first may appear to share the rubric, “modest.”

Speaking at the Skowhegan School in 1995, Alex Katz told of being horrified to discover, in a group exhibition early on in his career, that another artist had a big red painting that commanded more attention than his smaller, grayer one. Like Scarlett O’Hara swearing she would never be hungry again, Katz swore that he would never again allow himself to be eclipsed by another artist. The price of such a vow is the loss of whatever modesty represents as a virtue for painting. Today, with so many artists in the global arena, and with increasingly grandiose spaces to fill, embracing rhopography is clearly a career risk. Occasionally, a small gesture, such as a Richard Tuttle sculpture hung at knee level in a crack in the wall, may call attention to itself, just like the whispering voice of a woman forces her auditor to lean in closer. But this strategy can in itself be a form of ostentation, and, in today’s museum halls the size of train stations, even such reversals do not always function well.



Georg Flegel
Still Life, ca. 1620
Oil on wood
9" x 11"
Alte Pinakothek, Munich

BACKGROUND IMAGE:

Mira Schor
Modest Painting, 2000 (detail)
Ink and gesso on linen
12" x 16"

My introduction to painting was also an introduction to modest painting, at home in the workshop of my father, Ilya Schor. This was a space closer in spirit to the shadowy calm of Tanizaki's traditional cedar toilet than to our usual image of what an artist's studio looks like, or should look like in order to reflect importance on the work produced in it. It is important here to use the word "workshop" rather than studio, because of the expectations that people bring to the concept of the artist's studio these days: big and prodigiously messy, or huge and museumlike in its architectural severity and professional lighting. Megalography was increasingly the order of the day, but my father worked in the tiny former "maid's room" of our New York apartment on the Upper West Side. (During the era in which this building was constructed, maids were accorded a prison cell-sized chamber slightly larger than the width of one window and barely big enough for a single bed, with a bathroom the width of a bathtub.) In this narrow, little room, my father painted small gouaches that represented and recreated the life of the Hasidic community of his shtetl of Zloczow, in Galicia, Poland, in the period during and immediately after World War I. He also created elaborate and unusual treasures, including silver Torah Crowns covered with intricate cutout and engraved figures from Jewish life and Biblical stories, doubly marking this space as feminine, beyond its domestic associations, by the secondary cultural status of the crafts practiced within.

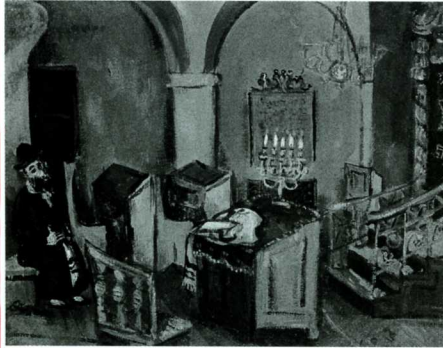
Every stroke of paint carries art-historical DNA, and in my father's brushwork there is the influence of the shimmering loose color found in the work of Bonnard or Vuillard (modest masters, both). The humility of traditional Hasidic life is reflected in his reduced aesthetic style. For example, *Visitor in the Synagogue* depicts a lone Jew sitting unobtrusively to the left in a small synagogue interior. Self-effacement in the house of God is embodied in the way small brushstrokes create a warm, softly lit atmosphere. The painting is suffused with silence and patience. The ego of the artist exists only in the form of respect and tenderness for the subject recollected in memory and for painting itself. My father's paintings are not expressionistic, like those of Mané Katz, a contemporary who depicted similar figures with the painterliness of Chaim Soutine, nor are they surrealistic, like Chagall's fanciful, gravity-challenged depictions of the shtetl, although both these precedents inform them. Occasionally, they shift into a Cubist-inspired

mode, but the intrusion of Modernist "styling" causes them to lose some of the anonymity of style that I find so emotionally compelling. What they may owe to folkloric structures is counterbalanced by sophisticated composition and control over representational accuracy—and in particular by the deftness of the paint strokes, which build up and delineate both form and space.



Ilya Schor
Washing Hands, ca. 1950s
Gouache on board
10" x 7½"

Ilya Schor
Visitor in the Synagogue, ca. 1950s
Gouache on board
8" x 10"



My understanding of the link between practice and effect was learned by watching my father work, as I absorbed the aesthetic and philosophical implications of how he mixed paint on the palette and applied it to the panel's surface. Occasionally, I was given a little "painting lesson": This is how you put paint on the palette, in an orderly procession of colors; this is how you mix the paint, with a rhythmic backward and forward stroke of the wrist so as to safeguard the integrity of the small sable brushes; this is how you paint, moving your brush along the surface of the painting and the edge of the figures with swift, mobile strokes. Equal tenderness was accorded the tools of the trade, the image, and the subject. You painted as you stroked a cat, gently, and never against the grain.

If modesty is an instinctive as well as an intellectually and morally based turn away from the limelight, contemporary art's focus on abjectness or the pathetic can be read as a reaction formation to the artist's awareness of the difficulty of painting in the limelight, during a time when getting the limelight seems for many the only excuse for making art in the first place. In an era of spectacle, when the painter steeped in postmodern theory is well aware of paintings and of him or herself as images being bought and sold, can modesty be anything other than a pose, a face put on the artwork to sell it? Resistance to self-commodification in the pursuit of such now-fraught or antiquated values like truth, be it to an outer precept or an inner drive, is more and more difficult to sustain.

Self-consciously modest and deliberately "mediocre" paintings—by admitting to the futility of the effort to paint in the face of more spectacular media—may be the truest painterly expressions possible in contemporary life; yet, they also may be seen as symptoms of retrenchment, markers of a reduced confidence in what painting can express. Tanizaki looks to the use of gold in traditional Japanese lacquerware and fabric design and the fate of that gold when the glare of electricity hits it: "And surely you have seen, in the darkness of the innermost rooms of these huge buildings to which sunlight never penetrates, how the gold leaf of a sliding door or screen will pick up a distant glimmer from the garden, then suddenly send forth an ethereal glow, a faint golden light cast into the enveloping darkness, like a glow upon the horizon at sunset. . . . A phosphorescent jewel gives off its glow and color in the dark and loses its beauty in the light of day. Were it not for the shadows, there would be no beauty."

Modest paintings are garments of silver, even harder than gold ones to make and perceive in the bright lights of contemporary culture.

Mira Schor is an artist and writer living in New York City. She was winner of the Frank Jewett Mather Award for Distinguished Art Criticism in 1999 and is at work on a book about contemporary painting.