WORLD VIEW

by John Yau

In its depiction of an isolated group of individuals, far-reaching synthesis of different styles, sober monochrome palette, subtle tonalities, multiple focal points, pictorial investigation of near and far, and inclusion of the viewer as a corporeal presence in the composition, Tim Eitel's *Öffnung* ("Opening," 2006; p. 32) recalls Théodore Géricault's disturbing masterpiece *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819). Contrary to expectations, Eitel does not appropriate, cite, parody, or ironically comment upon Géricault's painting. The relationship between the two paintings is far complex than any of these well-worn post-modernist strategies, which by now have become familiar conclusions, make possible. In fact, one of the affinities these two paintings share is their questioning of tradition and legacy. Géricault dispensed with the heroic ideal by refusing to make the central figure the focal point of the viewer's attention, while Eitel declined the literal by deliberately rejecting the convention whereby the painter using photographs announces that the work is based on a ready-made, a mediated image.

Although it is not immediately apparent, *Öffnung* is a carefully staged realist painting that faultlessly combines flatness and spatiality—geometric abstraction and figures gathered in a room. Done largely in grays, blacks, and whites, the painting is a tall, vertical rectangle that encourages the viewer to divide the scene horizontally into two equal rectangles. The upper half is a dark gray, nearly black geometric abstraction done in the style of Barnett Newman, with a luminous white "zip" that vertically divides the dark gray ground into two, slightly unequal rectangles, as well as continues down until it intersects the schoolboys gathered in front of it. The intersection shifts the painting from a flat surface above to a rounded space below.

In the rounded space, which occupies the lower half of the painting, thirteen uniformed high school students are presumably on a field trip to a museum. Twelve boys are sitting on or leaning against a round banquette in the middle of the darkened space, whose slightly curving walls extend beyond the painting's edges, eventually embracing the viewer, who becomes the fourteenth, unseen figure in the painting. We are both in the painting and standing outside, looking at it; and everything is in the present tense.

A lone girl stands on the left, away from the boys. Beside the "zip," she is the only other true vertical in the painting. One of the painting's focal points, she is slightly turned away from the picture plane, and her long black hair prevents the viewer from seeing her face. She has on a small robin's-egg blue and white backpack, which fashionable adolescent girls are apt to include in their wardrobe. The robin's-egg blue is the one bit of color in this otherwise gray, black, and white painting. The girl is holding something that resembles, at least from its diagonal angle, the handle of a broom.

Placed what we feel to be dead center between the painting's edges is a slightly chubby, white-shirted boy; he is seated in profile on the banquette, and is one of the two figures in this group whose face the viewer can scrutinize, as the rest are turned away. He is completely engrossed in looking at his fist, which seems to belong to someone else and is ready to punch him in the face. His self-involvement causes the viewer to examine the figures around him more closely. No one is talking to anyone else; communications of all kinds have been superseded by a collective silence. And yet, for the most part, the art or the "opening" in the wall is not their focus either. All of them are either entranced or withdrawn, though by what is never made explicit. Just to the right of the chubby boy is another, thinner boy, whose attention seems to have been caught by the "zip." He is leaning forward, despite the fact that another boy's body crosses in front of his, and he is holding a white plastic bag containing what seems to be a thick rectangular object, possibly a book. His body language suggests that he is looking intently at the white "zip" that runs from the top edge straight down until it intersects the banquette. Another boy, who is seated on the far left of the banquette, has turned his head to the right; he too may be staring at the opening.

Öffnung is a straightforward depiction of figures in an uncluttered public space, and a painting of a painting (or sculpture) that becomes the walls of a room or vice-versa. It is a visual paradox, both something actual and a thoroughly considered fiction. As the artist of the painting, and the stage director who has choreographed these individuals, Eitel shows his hand by his attentiveness to detail, the careful positioning of the bodies, the tension between the similarity of their uniforms, hair cuts and hair coloring, and the differences in their poses, the weight of their bodies. He has applied the paint thinly, and been especially sensitive to the subtle shifts in tonality. All of it has been made to look "natural," something you might actually see one day while walking through a museum. Consequently, the boy carrying the bag, and by the extension the viewer (who has possibly also gone shopping), is looking at a high modernist geometric abstraction that becomes two curved walls, with a narrow light-filled space between them. The allusions are obviously to Newman and Richard Serra, and to the modernist legacy of both the literal and truth-to-materials. Into this allusiveness, Eitel has added the unlikely and unexpected possibilities of fiction and staging without developing—I want to emphasize this—either a narrative or an explicit commentary. In addition, the figures don't feel manipulated; they are in the poses that Eitel found, observes, or remembers. If there are stories to be told, it is the viewer who will do the telling. Eitel achieves this openness to the viewer's presence by making the floor of his rounded space extend toward the floor on which we are standing.

The difference between *Öffnung* and *The Raft of the Medusa* is, of course, the subject matter. Géricault was at the forefront of a generation of romantic realists who believed their imagery should convey extreme states. *The Raft of the Medusa* is a morbid painting of hopeless desperation in which there are no heroes. Fifteen members of the crew—there were originally one hundred and fifty—have survived sedition, severe weather, and the effects of starvation and cannibalism. Eitel does not attempt to inhabit Géricault's subject, and there is no overt evidence that he had its turbulent drama in mind when he started *Öffnung*. While less dramatic, Eitel's painting is as observant as Géricault's: all of us are equally isolated from each other and from ourselves. The boy stares at his fist as if it belongs to someone else. Like Géricault, Eitel does not settle into polemic. He recognizes the condition as both common and widespread.

It is not simply that we are estranged from each other; it is that we exist in a state of remoteness from ourselves and from the world. We have become oblivious to the turbulence sweeping through this world; at the same time, we have internalized it. We have lost our bearings. In a room full of art, a room that is art, most of the adolescents are disinterested to the point that they don't even feel the urge to make fun of what they are experiencing because they are not actually in the room; they have absented themselves. And yet, Eitel doesn't take a superior position to his subjects; he doesn't treat them ironically or turn them into caricatures. Each is serious in his or her way, and we feel sympathetic toward them.

The figure who seems interested in the "zip" is one of Eitel's surrogates for the viewer. The artist's other surrogate is the girl who is standing alone. Looking at them, we end up looking at ourselves looking at a painting, and a painting within a painting. Many questions arise, with the most basic one being: Why have we come to look at art? What kind of experience do we wish for when we go to a museum? And what is it that we want to discover or take away when we leave the museum and return to our daily lives? None of the figures are interested in providing an answer, and, in their isolation from each other and themselves, they convey the possibility that there is no answer that they would agree upon. The story is for the viewer to tell.

Eitel is an extremely astute observer of human gestures and the telling space between individuals. Possessing an uncommon sensitivity to the whole range of ways we settle into our bodies, his depictions of individuals who are alone, in pairs, and part of a larger group are memorable for the extreme economy with which he conveys their nameless dramas. He concentrates much of his investigation on the bond between the isolated individual and society, which has broken down because there

is no sense of a collective purpose or goal. He recognizes that everything we do—and this includes sitting with our legs crossed in a corner—is revealing. And yet, what this act, this moment of comfort, discloses is neither obvious nor necessarily dramatic. Eitel lets his subjects speak for themselves. We are both transparent and opaque. This is one of the crucial features of his depictions of individuals; he allows them to both inhabit and define their own space. At the same time, in his staging of reality, he is remarkably free of didacticism, a position that is not only one of the most difficult to achieve in this age of theory and proscription, but also the one that we need to encounter.

In *Lager* ("Warehouse," 2006; p. 22), Eitel uses a palette of warm and cool shades of gray, black, bluish-black, and blue to depict a ubiquitous urban sight, a shopping cart piled high with a homeless person's worldly belongings. A similar palette is used in *Besitz* ("Collection," 2006; p. 10) and *Graffiti* (2006; p. 9), both of which are midnight paintings depicting a homeless man with a shopping cart. We have seen these carts and individuals so often, and for so long, that they have become part of the backdrop of our daily life. In *Lager*, Eitel reverses this perception, and makes the shopping cart creaking under the weight of its wrapped cargo the sole focus of our attention; we literally have to distinguish its bulky presence from its austere backdrop and from the all-encompassing darkness. It is we who are disenfranchised from it.

Is the shopping cart the sole occupant of a bare, dimly lit stage or a shadowy mass that we have encountered on an empty street one night? In either case, the shopping cart becomes a covered figure which, by its central, dominating presence, is speaking to the viewer, even if only in the softest whisper imaginable. As with all of Eitel's recent work, neither irony nor overt, accepted social commentary play a role in this painting. He has found a way to defer meaning so that the act of looking can take place.

Eitel recognizes that the legacy and conventions associated with high modernism and postmodernism, pure abstraction and the ready-made, have become oppressive and limiting. For him, the deeper more abiding issue is the possibility of arriving, through the medium of paint, at a place where seeing, thinking, reflection, and inquiry can occur, without any of these modes of apprehension dominating the others. With that end in mind, the artist will change the paintings as he is making them; things will be added or taken away. At the same time, he isn't interested in foregrounding his painting in process, and leaves no evidence of the changes that have taken place. He applies the paint thinly, with particular attention to tonality and subtle changes in light. In recent years, his palette has been dominated by different shades of gray, tending toward the darker end of the spectrum. His structural synthesis of plain, stage-like settings with stern public spaces brings the viewer into the painting, as well as acknowledges the spectator. We are in a rather cold, not particularly hospitable world, and our relationship to it and others is not clear. We are looking and we are looking at ourselves looking, and we are not sure what we are looking for. It is not a big leap to think of this as a condition that is inherent to postmodern life.

In its shape and contour, the shopping cart resembles a cross between a Brancusi sculpture and an object wrapped by Christo. As I have previously observed about *Öffnung*, I don't think that the artist had their works in mind when he began *Lager*. By defining a dark, ascetic environment that is simultaneously artificial and realist, abstract and unadorned, the artist achieves an unsettling duality. The transparency we associate with realism, that window onto a common world, has been replaced by the recognition that the man-made, the fictive, the actual, and the necessary are intertwined. And yet, as the artist knows full well, the shopping carts of the homeless are not a fiction. In *Lager*, he makes us responsible for deciding whether the shopping cart we are looking at is a fact or a fiction or both. Once again, he has found a way to compel the viewer to become the storyteller. In contrast to *Öffnung*, however, any story one might be compelled to tell about the shopping cart leads away from the subject, as well as muffles the disclosure we cannot, and perhaps do not want to, either hear or see.

Is it possible to see without preconceptions the things and people we encounter in our daily lives and thus to learn from them? This is one of the crucial questions Eitel repeatedly returns to in his work, and it suggests why he rejected photographs as a ready-made. A ready-made evokes Marcel Duchamp, mechanical reproduction, the absence of the hand, as well as an emotional distance or coolness regarding the subject matter. It is often a form of quotation and a vehicle for irony. If we consider *Öffnung*, we get the sense that the artist believes that using a ready-made to maintain an accepted aesthetic distance from subject matter has become redundant because viewers have for the most part already absented themselves from engaging with art. And those who haven't aren't quite sure what it is they are seeking. Is it the purity of abstraction, solace from time, transcendence, or pleasure? Are these goals still worthy or is it time that we begin to earnestly seek others?

In contrast to *Öffnung*, and its scrutiny of the viewer, *Lager* is a different matter. There are no surrogate viewers; and the dialogue that occurs is the direct result of the viewer's commitment to the painting. Gray imbues the subject with a somber mood and, almost paradoxically, refuses to direct the viewer as how to see the painting. As Jasper Johns has pointed out, gray is a neutral, non-directive color. In making a homeless individual's overflowing shopping cart the subject of a large

painting, Eitel has consciously entered a terrain fraught with pitfalls. We have seen this fact of society's ongoing implosion many times before, but have we ever really looked at it? This is the question Johns asked of the viewer when he painted *Flag* (1954–55), and it remains relevant today. We have seen so much, and been constantly assailed with an endless stream of images transmitted from all parts of the world, but when have we stopped and looked at them? Perhaps more importantly, can we look at them? And what is the price we pay for looking at them?

In *White Burning Car III* (1963), one of Warhol's most horrific silkscreen paintings, the artist chose a photograph of a car upside-down and in flames. In front of the car and abutting the painting's left edge is a telephone pole from which the driver of the car hangs, like a grotesque parody of Jesus Christ. In the background one sees a figure walking away. That figure is Warhol's surrogate viewer; he need not stop and become engaged with the accident. By putting that figure in the painting, Warhol offers the viewer a way out of the situation. Like the man walking away, the viewer can also leave this image of a disaster behind. Johns doesn't want us to stop looking, and neither does Eitel. Both want our looking to become a conscious engagement in which we begin to reflect upon what we are seeing.

The figure in Warhol's painting hasn't been in the accident, and he is walking away, glad to be alive. There is an undeniable comfort in this; and it is one the viewer also knowingly and perhaps even smugly receives. *Lager* entrances us, but it doesn't offer us either comfort or a way out. For one thing, it is difficult to contextualize the painting. It isn't a ready-made, and it is both a staged image and a realist depiction. We look and we look again. The grays have neutralized a loaded subject, transforming it into a lone covered thing on a darkened stage; it is a metonym for humans and the degree to which they have withdrawn from themselves and the world. All of the questions Eitel asks in *Lager* can be reduced to one: Is what we are seeing a portrait of those who are looking at the painting? And if it isn't, then what is it of?

In *Rauch* ("Smoke," 2006; pp. 4–5), another recent large painting, Eitel depicts two men, one who is middle-aged and one who is possibly an adolescent, walking diagonally, from the painting's right side to the left, as if up a long corridor. All around them is smoke in one form or another. Even the ground they are walking on seems to be made of the same stuff that is rising and filling the air. The older figure is pulling a luggage cart, and both men are dressed casually; they look as if they are going on vacation. Coloristically, the younger man's clothes and the luggage cart, which are different shades of blue, and the older man's mauve hat and shirt, stand in subtle contrast to the different shades of gray that make up the rest of the painting. Ahead of these travelers is an opening, where three men are working. One is digging, while the other two are standing by, looking at what is happening. All the figures appear to be completely unaware of their surroundings.

Eitel's sensitivity to the telling space both separating and joining individuals, and what it suggests about our times, is central to his preoccupation. In *Öffnung*, he carefully scrutinized the space between individuals in a group, as well as the space between the viewer and a work of art. His arrangement of figures is flawless, because, for all of its staging, it looks so natural. This is an artist who understands how we act when we aren't posing, when we think nobody is looking. Instead of contemplating a work of art, viewers are pulled into a space where they have to reflect upon both what they are looking at, and what they are looking for. It is not enough to say that the artist reveals the degree to which we are all adrift, both individually and collectively, though that is certainly in his work. It goes deeper than that. In *Lager*, Eitel took a loaded subject and neutralized it to the point that we had to examine ourselves as much as we focused our attention on a shopping cart that was barely visible. In these and other paintings, such as *Rauch*, he synthesized the staged and the actual with a poetic dispassion that strikes me as unique.

While looking at *Rauch*, which is a large, commanding painting, and remembering it later, I wondered if the artist was thinking about 9/11 when he began. For this viewer, at least, he has brought two very different moments into close proximity, the time before the planes struck the towers, when getting on a plane seemed easier and less fraught with anxiety, and the time after the towers collapsed, and smoke and dust filled the city's sky. And yet Eitel has made no specific allusion to 9/11, and it may not have even been on his mind when he began the painting. The painting's openness to interpretation and speculation is just one of its many strengths. It can absorb the viewer's inquiries because the painter has been attentive to every inch of the surface, as well as defined a space that is believable and, oddly enough, inviting. This is indicative of the thoroughness of the artist's approach. In *Rauch*—and this true of Eitel's best paintings—the artist doesn't attempt to provide a stable answer to the many questions it raises. Rather, he tries to get to that place where the questions remain in the air, unanswerable but urgent and necessary.