

A Conversation - Tim Eitel and Joachim Pissarro

Joachim Pissarro: Can you describe your practice—your inspiration and technique—for this new series of paintings?

Tim Eitel: The paintings are all based on photographs that I take on city streets. The photographs are quite casual, but each one is part of an ongoing investigation. Typically, I get attached to an idea or motif and work through it for as long as I am attracted to it. Right now I am interested in doing portraits of homeless people and at the same time I am working on images of various security forces—police, soldiers, guards—which seem more and more omnipresent wherever I go.

JP: The recent paintings do feel more like portraits than your earlier work. Although figures were central in *Die Bewohner*, for example, your portrayal of people in this new series feels much more intimate, much more personal.

TE: It is a strange relationship to have with the subject—to photograph someone who is fully unaware of my existence and to then work so closely and intimately with his image while creating a painting. But yes, I would agree that these portraits are more individualized and humanized than figures I've painted in the past. I am interested now in the notion of individuality and how it can be concealed, voluntarily or involuntarily. On the one hand, I see the homeless men and women who live on the fringes of society. And on the other end of the spectrum, I am looking at men in uniform—cops, soldiers, guards. By becoming part of a gang of armed men meant to represent safety and security, these officers define themselves as a certain “type.” There is no room for unique personalities. In the case of a homeless person or a policeman, it can be very hard to see an individual.

JP: I love this idea that you are bringing forward subjects who nobody really “sees.” First of all, as you've just mentioned, there is a lack of complicity between you (the artist) and your subject. Yours are unwitting models—oblivious to the fact that they are being observed and documented by your camera. Furthermore, you take their images and present them as paintings—a format that is meant to be seen, closely observed, and appreciated as art. This visibility contrasts greatly with the reality of a homeless person who—though very much on display while living out his life on the street or in the subway for all to see—is regularly ignored by passersby.

TE: The men in uniform, on the other hand, represent a way in which the world has changed in terms of danger and false notions of security. Everywhere I go these days I see more military

police, more guards, more security, and more machine guns. To me this is a strategy enacted

to remind people (or convince them) that they are in danger. In order to make us appreciate extra security measures (which, in and of themselves, are scary and invasive) it must first be made clear that we are living in a danger zone. This is reinforced by the dehumanization of the soldiers—we hardly see them as individual human beings and we fear that, by the same token, they will also not really see us.

JP: The question of how to negotiate our individuality within a context where it is constantly under threat is certainly daunting. This has something to do with the Nietzschean assertion that

there is no such thing as a “real world.” As he puts it in *The Will to Power*, there are no states of fact as such but only interpretations. Meaning, there is not a single world, but an “infinity of worlds” each of which emanates from a particular and unique living individual. You might say that each individual, not only inhabits, but simply is his own world. The question, insistently and repetitiously posed by your paintings is this: how do these distinct individual worlds communicate with each other? And furthermore, how can individuals exit the alienating cage imposed upon them in order to weave the first threads of dialogue with each other?

TE: The themes of alienation and estrangement are universal, very stirring, and definitely an important aspect of these works. My paintings tap into a shared experience.

JP: It is perhaps an understatement to say that your paintings strike a nerve. They truly get under your skin and effectively stir the soul. I am reminded of Hans Holbein's *Der tote Christus*

(1521–1522) which always amazes me by how it conjures such life and power in the dead body of Christ. Your paintings of sleeping homeless men strike me in just the opposite way: the men appear shockingly near death even though they are alive. Your subjects are unconscious and deep in slumber, but their portraits are eerily lifeless. In contrast to these stirring portraits you are also now turning out compositions that are more abstract. Though still representational, there are certain works that are figureless and very graphic. For instance, *Untitled (Patrol)* [p. 15], at first

appears to be a purely formal study in black and gray. The central area is so dark that it is

hard to see, upon first glance, the uniformed officers lurking in the shadows. It takes time to really see this painting and, in a way, the narrative implication of a group of police men obscured by darkness is reinforced through the painting's composition. As in a painting by Ad Reinhardt—which, as you fixate on it, goes from a solid black to reveal subtle shades of brown, blue, and green—your painting also opens up upon extended viewing. In this case revealing a figural scene.

TE: I am getting more interested in formal compositions. Indeed, in some of my latest works there are no figures at all. I am looking at street life in terms of abstraction. For instance, cardboard scraps tacked up to cover graffiti on a cement wall become a geometric composition of color and form. With regard to abstraction, I am interested in spiritual and philosophical concepts and how these can be expressed through art. The abstract painters who are most appealing to me are those whose paintings, I feel, express a transcendent idea. What I mean to say is that I most enjoy abstract paintings which I actually do not see as being abstract at all. When I look at a work by Mondrian, Rothko, or Newman, I find there to be a very clear subject matter. Their works, to me, are not just purely formal.

JP: I would absolutely agree with you and I do see this in your work—especially the paintings without figures, such as *Untitled (Cover)* [p. 21], or *Untitled (Blocked)*, where the cardboard boxes create a balanced formal composition. Indeed you are touching on an idea raised by Luc Ferry and John Golding, among others. These authors suggest that major figures of abstraction (including the very artists that you've just mentioned) were, in fact, classicists in that they were depicting a vision of reality—albeit a level of reality that remains inapprehensible to most of us. Their claim is that certain abstract artists reached a level of transcendent reality and depicted a greater and higher truth than our daily truth.

TE: I definitely go back and forth when making a painting. There is a lot of pure, formal thought that goes into each painting where I work out how the shapes relate to each other. And in the end, I think the forms influence the subject matter. The formal structure of my paintings has a very strong impact on their meaning. For instance, in *Crows* [p. 47], the expansive gray backdrop behind the crows is not only a formal device; it also purports meaning. I see this as one of my bleakest paintings yet, and this sense of despair is presented formally by dark emptiness which dwarfs the birds.

JP: Yes, this painting is chilling and quite poetic. In fact, it calls to mind Edgar Allen

Poe's *The Raven*. It is bleak, certainly, but also melancholic. The dark background (of this work and many of your paintings in general) is also reminiscent of Edouard Manet. In particular Manet's, *The Ragpicker* (1865), which was inspired by Charles Baudelaire's poem, *Le Vin des Chiffonniers* (*The Rag-Picker's Wine*)¹, and which depicts a derelict figure coming forth from dark shadows. In your paintings, as in Manet's "paintings of everyday life," figures are often semi-obscured and shown coming out of darkened surroundings.

TE: Part of the reason for the dark, flat backgrounds is to set up an image that enables the viewer to come up with their own narrative and bring to the painting his own context and set

of associations. For you that may be Manet, Baudelaire, and Poe, but others may have entirely different associations. Some may find relationships to their own lives, for instance, and not at all to art or poetry. I am not against finding parallels to other artists in my work. I want to be clear, however, that I am not commenting on Barnett Newman, for example, but rather I am incorporating formal aspects that are similar to his into my own paintings. For me there can be no right or wrong associations, but it is important to leave the paintings—the narrative and the formal components—open to interpretation. The images may appear clear and straightforward, but at the same time they are meant to feel very open—to give a sense of universality and collective memory.

JP: A great strength of the new paintings is that they do not permit us to remain indifferent—whether to your subject matters, or their representation. These works have narratives that must be uncovered and contemplated. There is more room for participation on the part of the viewer, which is very intriguing.

TE: What has always been interesting for me is that once you start to work on a particular subject—you start to see that subject everywhere. There is a saying that we only see what we know, and sociologically, this notion might explain why it is so easy to ignore the homeless, the cardboard boxes, and the pigeons, that are all over the streets. If you don't "know" these things, they become invisible. But in front of a painting, you bring so many things you know already—your expectations, taste, opinions—that you can't help but look at the subject with other eyes. A painting is an invitation to go and see things differently.

NOTES

1. One sees a rag-picker go by, shaking his head,
Stumbling, bumping against the walls like a poet,
And, with no thought of the stool-pigeons, his subjects,
He pours out his whole heart in grandiose projects.

[Charles Baudelaire, *Le Vin des Chiffonniers* from *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857).

Translation by William Aggeler, *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno, CA:
Academy Library Guild, 1954)]

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