

Two Short Case Studies: Good Art or Good Research or Both?

Gary Pearson

Associate Professor, Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies
University of British Columbia Okanagan, Kelowna, Canada
gary.pearson@ubc.ca

Abstract: My paper examines certain pitfalls and possibilities of critical judgement in the context of analysis of an artwork by Julian Schnabel, and one by Lucas Glenn, a 4th year BFA student. **PLEASE NOTE: This paper is a draft version and requires editing and minor adjustments prior to E-Book publication. Thank You.**

Key Words: Medium Specific, Clement Greenberg, Provisional, Mobile, Fixed Meanings

When I was a graduate student at the University of Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon, Canada many years ago one of the guests in the Visiting Artist/Scholar program was Clement Greenberg. Needless to say his impending visit created quite a buzz amongst grad students and the art community at large. Greenberg needs little introduction to this reading audience yet it doesn't hurt to reiterate that during the 50's and 60's he was perhaps the leading art theorist of the time and his influence on art practice and criticism then, including that in Canada, was still being felt into the late-70's, particularly among a dwindling cohort of artists working in abstract painting and sculpture. When I say dwindling cohort I mean those artists who were part of what we refer to as late-modernist formalism – artists who remained faithful to a philosophy of arts autonomy, to a non-objective, self-referential art. There's no question that Greenberg's influence kept the "integrity of the picture plane" alive for numerous generations of color field/abstract painters, whose work became ever more programmatic, mannered, pompous, and self-parodying within the confines of the formalist paradigm. Indeed, much of this type of painting produced from the early-mid 70's even into the 80's was often said to be "it's so bad it's good". Ironically, the slide into decadence of formalist abstraction made abstraction strangely popular again, this time for a postmodern generation of artists who put it to good and yes, ironic use.

But to return to Greenberg's guest appearance at the university: he did a public talk and made studio visits, although I wasn't on the studio list so I can't speak directly to that. What I can say however is that I and other graduate students and certain professors were invited to a lunch with Greenberg at the University Faculty Club. It was an engaging 2 to 3 hours as our guest held court, recounting one anecdote after another about the 1st generation "New York School" artists, their strengths and weaknesses, and the history and problems of abstract art. We soaked it all in. Most memorable for me oddly enough, was a minor incident upon our arrival at the Faculty Club. Before going into the restaurant we gathered in the vestibule, checked our coats and prepared to have a drink before receiving

our call to a dining table. As it happened I was standing next to Greenberg close to the bar. Greenberg ordered bourbon. I ordered one too. The young barman, who was probably a student, was succinct enough to recognize that Greenberg was a special guest and returned promptly with his drink, served in a sherry glass. Greenberg barked ‘What is this?’ The barman said ‘Your drink sir.’ To which Greenberg replied ‘Serve it to me in a real glass, a whiskey glass.’ Perhaps I read too much into it but this blunt matter-of-fact expression struck me as consistent with his no-nonsense style of criticism; he was known to speak directly to the object of critique not around it –while his critique methodology was certainly rigid and narrow, dependent as it was on opticality and medium specificity, it didn’t lack in rigour. It would be easy to say that Greenberg’s approach stands in contrast to the climate of critique today, which is marked by an inclusive, open-ended and much more forgiving set of conditions.

In a recent article on teaching criticism and art writing titled “Style and Substance” writer and curator Brian Dillon says that ‘[...] it’s notable that many or most debates about art writing are still conversations “around” the subject: conversations around the “role” of the critic or writer, around the supposed freedoms of performance or ad hoc production, around theoretical allegiances [...]’ [Dillon 33] The author is a part-time educator in the MA in Critical Writing program at the RCA in London. He informs us that the field (art writing) is flourishing, and that ‘[...] a constituency exists for ways of writing and thinking that draw from avant-garde fiction and poetry, art history, theory, journalism or essayism, (and) the lineages of artists working with text and performance.’ In connecting style to the question of substance he describes style as ‘[...] the very soul and struggle of writing (therefore thinking) itself, a hole into which all your ambitions, all your programmes and all your manifestos will fall.’ At the end of the article he presents a challenge for the next academic year and for organizers of future panel discussions, saying that they should ‘[...] quit sketching the boundaries of that void, and fall in.’ [Dillon 33]

But perhaps sketching the boundaries, talking around the subject/object is a methodology of critique, critical judgement that is here to stay and we should accept it. In fact it might be quite liberating to expunge the word “good” from our critical vocabulary, and if the word “bad” had to be retained it would be paired with “not”, as in not bad. If the prevailing climate of critique is non-judgemental, non-committal, the need and ability to “tease out” and indeed be prepared to fill in meaning, would continue to be severely tested in the role of the serious art critic or educator, with the caveat that one could decline comment if the object of “critique” was too opaque or outside one’s purview. In spite of ones’ professional standing one should not be haunted by the idea of inadequacy. That said, the “official” collapse of connoisseurship in the sixties still seems to problematize the field, and most noticeably within academia. Now, the ready acceptance of the concept and use of the word “research” is unquestionably linked to its ambiguity and malleability, which in amongst its multiple interpretations seems to have in an (un)easy way become, in academia,

a surrogate for the term connoisseurship, providing a subtle mechanism for reinstating judgement of quality in the context of ones qualifications in recognizing “good research”.

Is it good art or good research? How rigorous is critique today in this, a post-medium, post-discipline era? In her essay “Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition” Rosalind Krauss said that she uses the term “technical support” as a way ‘[...] of warding off the unwanted positivism of the term “medium” which, in most readers’ minds, refers to the specific material support for a traditional aesthetic genre, reducing the idea of medium to what Michael Fried complains of as the basis of the “literalism” of the art he rejects.’ She goes on to say that the term ‘[...] “technical support” has the virtue of acknowledging the recent obsolescence of most traditional aesthetic mediums [...] while it also welcomes the layered mechanisms of new technologies that make a simple, unitary identification of the works physical support impossible [...]. [Krauss 55]

Not unlike most of the late-modernist formalist artists, Clement Greenberg and/or formalist critique itself had nearly run out of gas by the mid- late-seventies. Julian Schnabel has certainly said as much. In his memoir “C.V.J” published in 1987 [Schnabel 137] he recounts a visit by Greenberg to his show at the Leo Castelli Gallery in the spring of 1983. Schnabel describes how Greenberg walked through the gallery “shooting from the hip” – pointing to one painting after another to recommend such things cutting eighteen inches of the top of one, getting rid of the naphthol crimson light in the left panel in another, and to suggest he take the brown out of “The Raft” painting; which as Schnabel pointed out in his book – “[...] the brown happened to be the raft.” [Schnabel 141]

All humour aside, we can be confident that Greenberg didn’t much care if “the brown” was a raft or an orchid he was reacting to the color and its relationship to the overall formal composition, not to the subject narrative. “The Raft”, produced (painted) in 1982, at 108 X 228 inches is a massive work composed in oil, plates, bondo, branch, on wood, and is part of Schnabel’s “plate paintings” cycle of the late ‘70s to mid ‘80s. Oddly enough Greenberg, at least from Schnabel’s account, appears not to have noticed the plate encrusted surface or the tree branch which appears to project at least four feet out from the paintings surface. Had Greenberg willfully blocked out the works’ aggressive materiality or were these foreign objects (technical support) which by then were firmly written into the language and (anti)aesthetics in contemporary art, but being antithetical to a formalist thesis, that to engage with the topic would open a debate far more complex and fraught with uncertainties than a critique built upon color, line, and plane, that is, the optical, abstract and medium specific. Picasso had introduced a mixed technique/mixed genre vocabulary to modern art in 1912 or earlier, and further on Rauschenberg produced “Bed” in 1955, completed “Monogram” and “Canyon” in ’59; and in Italy in the ‘50s we had Alberto Burri; in France, Yves Klein; and in Spain, Antoni Tàpies. Modern art even in its origins resisted the idea of fixed meaning, so it’s not surprising that anything running counter to that premise even if there were/are consistent theoretical and practice-based

tropes attached to period-specific ventures and their legacies that are put into use today, might be called conservative. ‘The topic of conservatism in contemporary art is like that of religion: to be kept at arm’s length. [...] Conservatism runs counter to everything that is supposed to be interesting about contemporary art.’ [Fox 13] In the articles closing stanzas Dan Fox laments that some days postwar art history starts sounding like a Classic Rock radio station so that talking about Beuys, Judd, Weiner, and Smithson, is not unlike listening to Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young. He ventures that none of us want to become Mick Jagger, who incidentally is said to admire Margaret Thatcher, ‘But you grow old, the world changes and you sometimes wish it hadn’t. (and later) [...] Old ways can become better ways, and youth is not a guarantee of radicalism.’ [Fox]

“The Raft” is a history painting, a redux of “The Raft of the Medusa”, a nineteenth century Romantic painting by Theodore Géricault. As we know Géricault never witnessed the wreck of the French Royal Navy frigate The Medusa of the coast of Senegal in 1816 but he researched the story in detail and relied heavily upon the testimony of 2 of the 10 remaining survivors of the 150 sailors on board the vessel, on their 13 day odyssey to shore. In its online introduction to the Géricault painting The Louvre website states that in the Géricault ‘The whole composition is oriented toward this hope in a rightward ascent culminating in a black figure, the figurehead of the boat. The painting stands as a synthetic view of human life abandoned to its fate.’ [Louvre] Schnabel’s selection of such a key painting from the Romantic era to reprise is in the spirit of the generation of “Neo-Expressionist” painters of the late- ‘70s early-80s, to which he was linked along with artists such as Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, and David Salle. Art critic and curator Achille Bonito Oliva writes ‘In its nomad creativity, art in the ‘70s has found its movement par excellence, the possibility of unlimited free transit inside all territories with open references in all directions.’ [Oliva 11] Neo-Expressionism was intrinsically tied to post-modernism in its (paintings) open source attitude, provisional methodologies, and mobile reference points, so this period in time offered artists liberation from the closed systems and self-imposed censorship of formalist abstraction, which, along with Pop art derivations were the reigning models of contemporary painting.

Julian Schnabel’s painting is a near abstraction – a cypher for Géricault’s Romantic masterpiece. Stripped of all mimetic representations save for the literalness of the tree branch and dining plates, Schnabel’s work semiologically re-writes the form, content and meaning of the Géricault. The branch at the top corner index the black sailor, the mast, the landmass they hope to encounter; barren of foliage it strikes a forlorn picture. The silvery plates full and fragmented are signifiers of not only the turbulent water but the quotidian life, now seemingly not more than a shattered dream; but throughout all that hope is seen to prevail in the vestigial description of a human form clinging for all his life to the rafts edge. The color silver is symbolically related to the moon, and the ebb and flow of the tides; it is believed to be fluid, emotional and mysterious. While brown is serious, down-to-earth,

and signifies stability, structure and support, material security. Neither the Géricault nor the Schnabel paintings are notable for their poly-chromed palettes; one artist opted for a stark understated near achromatic realism, the other for a stark, raw symbolic abstraction. Done roughly 150 years apart both paintings could be said to be aligned to a Hegelian trajectory in art in which the social, political, and personal might freely operate. If a critique is to be based on concept, content, and context Greenberg's quibble about the brown was a misfire, he missed the boat as we say, or, as Schnabel has said, the raft.

Géricault's "The Raft of the Medusa" is believed to be a key painting of the Romantic period, timeless not only in its periodicity but in the narrative tradition of visual art overall. It's too early to speculate on the status of Schnabel's version of Géricault's history painting, but in the context of analysis past and present one can't help thinking about Charles Baudelaire's line in "The Painter of Modern Life" where he says 'By "modernity" I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and immutable.' [Baudelaire 23] Is the Schnabel good art or good research or both?

Art and research are at the forefront of art educator's mindsets today and to a certain extent the student mindset as well. At the University of British Columbia Okanagan campus in the south central interior of British Columbia (BC) where I teach, the subject of artistic research is or has recently become part of the aspiring pedagogical modus operandi. Like most institutions we, the faculty, are in general agreement of what artistic research is, what it looks like, and to a lesser extent how to institute a research oriented curriculum; we agree it is important and that we must support it. When students demonstrate a sound (good) research ethos, in whatever year of undergraduate or graduate studies, faculty members' antennae tends to go up. A student research ethos amongst our undergraduate cohort is not unusual but at the same time it's always interesting to see how it might be played out or pursued not only in research but in the product(s) of research. For this paper I have chosen to introduce one of our 4th year BFA students, Lucas Glenn, who will graduate this spring 2014.

Lucas Glenn may be described as a conceptual artist/student whose ideas determine the manner and materials, place and production strategies of his work. He reveals his background has been dominated by work in collage and has only recently ventured into sculpture. His practice, as he describes it '[...] has evolved into the selection and composition of found materials as an expression of contemporary ideas and themes.' [Glenn] In the first part of January this year he staged an exhibition titled "OK Cariboo" in the Fina Gallery at our university. To explain, OK Cariboo stands for two regions of our province: the Okanagan region in the south central part of the province, and the Cariboo, a region in the central part of BC. The Okanagan has developed a reputation for its agri-production (fruits and vegetables), viticulture, warm semi-arid climate, lifestyle and recreational opportunities surrounding the abundance of lakes and nearby mountains,

golf courses and other amenities. The Cariboo is noted for its more rugged characteristics including the weather, forestry, ranching and cowboy culture, mining, and recreational pursuits such as hunting and fishing. Glenn describes his interest lie in the fact both these regions originally thrived on their industrial and agricultural base, but like other areas around the world beset by economic uncertainties or decline have had to re-invent themselves for economic salvation; in both the aforementioned cases tourism was identified as the most sustainable venture. This identity transformation was identified as having layered and often conflicting narratives, historical backstories intersecting with contemporary realities and public perception.

OK Cariboo is an installation artwork comprised of multi-part units, or what Lucas Glenn calls visual essays, each contributing to an informal linkage of what outwardly appears to be a chain of aged archived nostalgia laden objects and ephemera, which for the most part these bricolage visual essays are. Openly consorting nostalgia through the aesthetic of aged materials and objects overlays the troubling commentary on subjects such as exploitation of migrant farm laborers, depletion of the Mountain Cariboo population by trophy hunters and reduction of natural habitat, the supplanting of fruit production by the more profitable viticulture industry; in these and other topical issues reveal just how removed most people are from the social, economic, and environmental consequences of regional realities. While these rustic objects might have a novel even romantic appeal they are indices for meanings quite distinct from their often benign superficial appearance.

A mud splattered all-terrain vehicle (ATV) with an oil/gas drum strapped on the rear was parked in the atrium near the entrance to the gallery, jerry cans were strewn about, two oil drums labeled GAS stood nearby. The installation ranged from the blunt to the subtle in its communication. The artist points to the Bauhaus School as an inspiration in the fabrication of OK Cariboo; for its utopian platform, form and functionality and its potential for a rich play of associations, for its practice diversity, inventiveness, and production values – which he in turn inverts to a dystopian, ironic, de-skilled, slacker constructivism – and bathos is inverted as well, from an appearance of the trivial and ridiculous to a mood of the important and serious. The “technical support”, as Krauss would describe it, that contributed to the overall conceptual and aesthetic tenor of Glenn’s installation included such things as Cariboo antlers, an ATV, photographs, aged apple crates, gas cans, a step ladder, shipping palettes, children’s toys, architectural plans, 2 X 4s, a laptop computer and computer game, and more. The laptop, halfway buried amongst building plans and construction paraphernalia was open at the “Hunter Game” which simulates you standing in a fixed position and using the track tab try to flush out an animal, preferably a big game animal, which as Glenn describes often takes 15 minutes, a half an hour, even up to an hour for it to come onto the screen. The artist said he finds this waiting game, the drawn out durational experience of the virtual hunt to parallel art in some degree. He mentioned John Baldessari. I also thought about Ceal Floyer. This association would also parallel the

artist's relationship to materials, as he explains that he often finds material limitations "freeing", and frequently works with what he's got to see what is possible rather than "chasing materials for their appropriateness."

Editing and minor adjustments will be made prior to E-Book publication. Thank You.

References and Bibliography

- 1) Dillon, Brian, "Style and Substance", *Frieze*, No. 158, October 2013, p. 33
- 2) Ibid.
- 3) Krauss, Rosalind, "Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition"; *October 116*, Spring 2006, pp. 55-56.
- 4) Schnabel, Julian. *C.V.J. Nicknames of Maitre D's & Other Excerpts from Life*, Pub. Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto, 1987. See: 'April 1982: Los Angeles Airport', pp. 137 – 138, and 'Spring 1983: Greene Street, New York City', pp. 141 – 142. Schnabel writes (p. 142): 'Because of his authoritative, declarative, easy-to-read style, and his early championing of Jackson Pollock, he enjoys a credibility and a power that has been one of the most destructive, inane, positivistic, and stifling forces against the growth of art in this country. (This type of positivism still goes on in other formalist guises.) His critical view is made up of unsupported assertions. He issued dicta and advice that deluded a generation of artists; I can't blame him for their willingness to make themselves into indentured servants to his formulas, for their willingness to absolve themselves of their responsibility of being artists, or for letting him crop their pictures. The very idea of it, letting someone come into your studio and cut off the part of your painting he doesn't like! And I'm not making this up.'
- 5) Ibid. p. 141
- 6) Fox, Dan, "Conservative Party", *Frieze*, N. 157, September 2013, p. 13.
- 7) Ibid.
- 8) <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/raft-medusa>
- 9) Oliva, Achille Bonito, *The Italian Trans-avantgarde*, Pub. Giancarlo Poiliti Editore, Third Edition, May 1983. P. 11.
- 10) Baudelaire, Charles, "The Painter of Modern Life", in *Modern Art and Modernism*, Ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison, New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1987, p. 23.
- 11) All references are from a conversation with the artist on January 13, 2014; and quotations from the exhibition proposal.