Graham Nickson and Chromatic Figuration
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Since the beginning of the century, one of the central problems of painting has involved the resolution of the duality between the purely formal self-referring nature of the medium and its representational or descriptive possibilities. This was the pivotal issue of early modernism, and it is the central issue faced by ambitious figurative painters today.

The paintings of Graham Nickson embody one of the most original and successful approaches the problems of figuration hat have emerged in recent years. His work combines haunting subject matter with rigorous pictorial construction, and achieves an extremely fine balance between the representation of objects and the expressive use of form. In his recently completed paintings, he has also been working with an innovative pictorial space that balances description and abstraction through the unifying means of color. His space in these paintings is constructed in terms of large areas of highly saturated colors that evoke specific light and atmosphere, but at the same time also function as abstract, open fields of color into and against which the figures and their surroundings are set. The interactions between figure and ground are conceived chromatically, as well as in terms of drawing or design, so that the purely pictorial qualities of the space are inseparable from — and in fact provide the matrix for — its representational or descriptive elements. As a result, Nickson's space as a density and pictorial force comparable to that of the best Color Field painting, while at the same time remaining straightforwardly representational. This synthesis appears to have been achieved largely in terms of a unity of color and atmosphere, which represents a distinct departure from the direction that most modernist representational painting has taken.

Historically, Nickson's position is a curious one, for while the specific pictorial problems that he has been dealing with for the past several years are very much

contemporary ones, they were first posed over half a century ago. In dealing with the complex relationships between surface and volume, color and drawing, abstract and descriptive space, he has had to confront problems that were posed, but for the most part left unsolved, by modernist figurative painting around the time of the First World War. At that time, two very different traditions seemed to have contributed equally to the decline of representational painting: one one hand, the anecdotal banality and literalness of the painting that grew out of the nineteenth-century realism associated representation with vulgarization; on the other hand, the strong formal emphasis of the painting that grew out of post-Impressionism moved away from representation altogether. The problems that Nickson inherited thus involved the formulation of subject matter subtle enough to give full scope to the pictorial means by which it is realized, without being merely neutral, and the formulation of a representational syntax that would avoid mannerisms and pictorial conventions based on those of the early modernists. These conventions include Cezannesque open drawing and use of blank white canvas to allow the forms to breath, Cubistic fracturing and patterning of forms to restrain movement into deep space, and Matissian bright flat color to keep pictorial space intangible. One thing all these conventions have in common is that they avoid the rendering of actual atmospheric effects. In fact, one might say that the creation of space and light without atmosphere (i.e. with whiteness and color, with flat planes and discontinuities) was one of the major features of early modernist pictorial construction.

Nickson, on the other hand, has used atmospheric effects as a vehicle for his color. This has allowed him to keep his drawing quite literal and the modeling and edges of his forms integral and closed without sacrificing spatial fluidity, since his color and atmosphere provide the unifying ambience that open contours and broken modeling might otherwise have had to provide. As a result, he has been able to keep his drawing and rendering refreshingly forthright, while at the same time keeping his pictorial space remarkably open. It is, paradoxically, the straightforward literalness of his drawing that has provided the basis of his originality. By avoiding the by-now conventional distortions

that have characterized so much of modern figurative imagery, Nickson was able to remain true to what he saw before his eyes, and to approach his motifs with a minimum of stylistic mannerisms.

In this context, the history of the procedures behind Graham Nickson's work is of particular interest. Nickson was trained in London, at Camberwell between 1965 and 1969, and at the Royal College of Art between 1969 and 1972. Most of his fellow students at both schools were abstract painters, and although Nickson continued to work representationally throughout that time, usually depicting the human figure, he also incorporated into his early paintings some of the conventional commonly derived from abstract painting (architectural forms rendered as large, brightly colored rectangles, abrupt transitions rendered with exaggerated brushwork, and fracturing of forms across the surface). In the early 1970s, however, he began to seek a finer and more original balance between the specific and the abstract. His works at that time were quite large, painted directly from life. The rendering of the figure was kept as simple as possible, the modeling affected by generalized patterns of dark and light, with abrupt value and color changes, based on strong contrasts without intermediary tones. What Nickson seems to have been seeking at this time was a style based on direct perceptual experience rendered as straightforwardly as possible and with the detail kept to a minimum. His major concern was to balance the descriptive and the abstract elements of his painting without relying on the conventions that he had inherited when he started out.

In 1972, Nickson revived a Rome prize that allowed him to spend the next two years in Italy. This allowed him to leave the art school ambience in which he had been working, to be on his own, to study first-hand and in depth the enormous amount of art that was available in Italy, and to spend a long period of time working in the Southern light. Shortly after he arrived in Italy, he also began an undertaking that surprised him almost as much as it surprised those around him: he began to paint sunrises and sunsets. Almost every day, for over two years, whether in Rome or traveling, Nickson painted the

rising and setting of the sun. This forced him to work much smaller than he had previously (usually on canvases of about 8 by 10 inches), to build up his images very quickly, and to learn to make very quick decisions because of the quickly changing light. Working this way also prompted him to use highly saturated colors, to emphasize the interaction of simple patterns and shapes on the surface of the canvas, and to render unusual and surprising color combinations. The dawn and sunset painting thus provided Nickson with great visual nourishment, and with an important stimulus for sharpening his technical procedures. They also appear to have provided him with a way of working around an historical impasse. For his choice of motifs had also brought him into confrontation with some of the problems that had faced the Impressionists a century earlier, and which he now faced under entirely different circumstance. By going back to Impressionist motifs and facing the problem of rendering light in terms of atmosphere, he was able to free himself from many of the post-Impressionist conventions that he had used in his earlier work.

At the same time Nickson was doing these hundreds of small landscape studies, he was working on large synthetic paintings, done in the studio, which employed some of the motifs of the smaller paintings and incorporated many of the discoveries that he was making about color and light. The larger paintings presented problems very different from those of the small studies. For one thing, their larger size entailed the use of very different brushwork, much larger fields of color and much more complex spatial construction. In contrast to the small outdoor studies, the large paintings were executed over periods of time measured in years rather than hours, and demanded greater distillation and concentration of the painter's expressive means. In terms of subject matter, he began to work on series of paintings based on a single figure represented in repose or contemplation, thus inventing imagery which had a certain mysterious fascination, but which was tranquil enough to allow for the richly orchestrated pictorial expression he sought.

In 1971, Nickson had done some painting depicting a woman on a terrace or balcony, with a panoramic landscape stretching out beyond. In 1972, he began this motif in a series of works that would occupy him over the next several years. The theme provided him with a contemplative and potentially mysterious subject, which was enough to allow for broad formal exploration, but which also had enough inherent interest to hold the viewer's attention and linger in his memory. Two of the crucial paintings done in this series are *seagull* finished in 1977, and *Concordia,* finished in 1978, which are two of the first paintings in which Nickson began to use predella panels around a large central image.

In *Seagull II*, Nickson also began to achieve a fine balance between the illusionistic elements of the image and its physical presence as a painted surface. The painting is large enough to fill the viewer's shoe visual field, and therefore has an imposing physical presence that forces one to regard it as a surface as well as an illusion. The vast sky that takes up nearly half the painting, for example, is rendered with nuances of color, brushwork and surface texture that have a physical immediacy and intensity comparable to first-rate abstract painting. Yet at the same time this area also functions as a sky, and its color also evokes a specific kind of space, atmosphere and light. In the lower half of the painting, the drawing is quite detailed and naturalistic. The creviced mountains, the water, the rooftops and the sleeping figure are rendered with an impressive accuracy of observation, which is balanced by the purely visual interest of their shapes and color and by the subtlety of brushwork and surface. The modeling of the figure also represents an important advance over Nickson's earlier work. Instead of being rendered in broad, flat areas of dark and light, the figure is modeled by a system of hatchwork brushstrokes, which torn — or, rather, almost seem to carve — the forms which color as much as with chiaroscuro. This kind of chromatic modeling is typical of much of his later work.

In *Concordia* many of the tendencies visible in *Seagull II* are also present, but much more developed. The eighteen small landscape studies in the predellas above and below the central panel form an impressive counterpoint to it. Each is rendered in an intense and quite different color harmony, as if to emphasize the enormous range of formal possibilities that the natural world is filled with; and each seems to suggest something of the enormous number of experiences that the painter had to choose from where he composed the central panel. The predella panels in this sense are like images of memories — not memories of events in the ordinary sense, but memories of there painting experiences, of evenings in different, often unfamiliar places, working quickly and intensely in rapidly changing light. The predella panels are a kind of documentation of the painters's past experiences, quick renderings of fleeting impressions here set in contrast to the more synthetic, slowly worked and contemplative central panel of the ensemble. The predella landscapes can also be read in relation to the figure depicted in the central panel, as dreamlike memory images that might be supposed to exist within the mind of the woman who leans forward so mysteriously in her chair, the angle of her arm anchored to the rooftop that is both beyond and right next to her, seeming to fix her own fugitive gesture in time as surely as the architecture around her.

The central panel of *Concordia* is even more impressively painted than that of *Seagull II*. The evocation of light is stronger, and the color harmonies that evoke that light are much more subtle. The sky, which is quite thinly painted, functions descriptively as an evocation of air and light, and at the same time as a large passage of very forceful brushwork. Below the simplified mountain forms, the water is painted with dazzling virtuosity. The combination of colors and brushstrokes produces an intense luminosity both within the physical surface and as an evoked illusion on atmospheric light. The light, in fact, seems even more tangible than the mountains or the architecture or the figure that it envelops. The rendering of the light transforms an apparently simple situation, a woman in a deck chair on a terrace overlooking mountains above a lake, into an image imbued with mystical awe. In this context, the predella panels function on yet another

level. Predella panels are traditionally used on altarpieces, and their use here seems to suggest that in a sense this painting also is an altarpiece, a celebration of some enormous mystery. The haunting quality of the image — the mysterious and deep state of contemplation that it evokes — is as intensely moving as the purely plastic experience of the picture. The balance between subject and rendering is movingly complete.

Both *Seagull II* and *Concordia* were started while Nickson was in Italy and finished in New York, where he has been working since 1976, and where he has concentrated most of his efforts on large synthetic paintings. As in the past, his procedure has involved combining drawings, landscape studies, memories and reveries to invent new images, and he has continued to work on these images in overlapping series. Thus, while he is presently continuing the *Woman on a Terrace* series, he has also begun to work with a number of other images. Some of these images have first been worked out in small studies, others in very large mixed-media drawings that are the same size as the paintings done after them. One of the most impressive of these images is *Woman : Stairs : Volcano* the first large painting Nickson conceived and executed entirely in New York. The composition was first worked out in a large drawing, which was done using a constructional technique that Nickson has also used for other works. The drawing is made up of hundred of pieces of irregularly shaped paper, which the artist draws on and shifts around, building the image up gradually, like a vast collage. Nickson's collaging, however, does not introduce discontinuous elements into his pictures space, but rather incorporates surface discontinuities into the descriptive continuity of the total image. Once again, the intention seems here to be that of enriching and balancing the descriptive elements of the drawing with a counterpoint of abstract forms, textures and shapes. In Nickson's paintings such contrapuntal effects are achieved by the tensions between color and drawing. In the drawings they are achieved by the way that the extremely varied gestures and textures of the surface are played against its descriptive content. The drawings (which employ a broad range of warm and cool chalks that give them, too, a certain coloristic complexity) are not only preparatory studies, but large-scale works in

their own right, and are often quite different in mood and feeling from the painted versions done after them. The drawing for *Woman : Stairs : Volcano,* for example, is closer in feeling and mood to *Seagull II* or *Concordia* that it is the to the painted version of *Woman : Stairs : Volcano*. The painted version is much brasher — much more "American," perhaps — than the drawing and the earlier paintings.

The same is true of the recently completed *Trasimeno Bather*, in which the light is clearer and the color both brighter and more dissonant than in any of Nickson's other large works. *Trasimeno Bather* contains perhaps the broadest repertory of formal means that Nickson has used to date, even incorporating the constructional effect of the large mixed-media drawings. The sky and water areas of the painting are painted on two separate panels, which are joined together at the horizon line, thus emphasizing the physical separation between the upper and lower, sky and earth, portions of the image. Here again, is in *Woman : Stairs : Volcano*, the "frame" does not surround the image entirely. The brightly colored and richly worked surface of the framing shape makes it an integral part of the composition, and like so much else in Nickson's work, paradoxically both emphasizes and belies the illusionism of the space that it delimits.

Paradox, ambiguity, and mystery are key elements of Graham Nickson's painting, both pictorially and emotionally. His enigmatic and beautifully realized images not only have the great virtue of being able to engage and entrance the regarding eye for hours on end, they also stick in the mind and haunt on long after they have passed from sight. The ambition, technical accomplishment and high level of quality in Nickson's work make him one of the most noteworthy and promising young painters working today.

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