"Serene and Riotous Light: The Art of Graham Nickson,"
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For over three decades, Graham Nickson has painted figures in landscapes, most of which include a stretch of water. Thus his figures are bathers, and they are statuesque, the work of an artist who has mastered the traditions of draftsmanship—as we see, at a grand scale, in his large pencil and charcoal drawings. All the demands made familiar by centuries of theory and practice are handsomely met by these more than half-naked anatomies: poses are legible, proportions are not only believable but elegant, and volumes are solidly modeled. Embodiments of an exalted canon, Nickson's bathers are also down-to-earth bodies: people we recognize as inhabitants of our present. And we recognize them, usually, without seeing their faces, for these figures stand with backs turned or heads lowered. Or their features are hidden by the shirts they are donning or removing. So there is only the look of their bodies to give them their familiarity.

When they are not dressing and undressing or laying out towels and taking them up, Nickson's bathers carry beach furniture from here to there. Settled, they lie in the sun. Focusing the gaze, they encourage the mind to drift, as it often does in the calm of a day at the beach. Sooner or later it occurs to us that each age has its own idea of a typical body. And its own idea of bodily perfection. Ancient epitomes of feminine beauty, in the form of marble Venuses, tend to be chunkier than contemporary ideals allow. In the 16th-century, Bronzino and Pontormo and a few others devised a new—and skinnier—ideal, which persists, skinnier still, on the catwalks of the present day. During the 1920s, however, the photographer Brassaï offered images of women far more voluptuous than any Athenian Venus. In every period, it seems, ideals of beauty are various. Rubens's perfect woman was an ocean of flesh, and yet, elsewhere in the 17th-

century, Bernini sculpted a St Theresa who is no doubt slim or even girlish beneath her ecstatic robes.

As bodily ideals evolve, they clash, creating a labyrinth of possibilities, each one of them available—and many of them no doubt tempting—to an artist who has immersed himself in the traditions of figure drawing as thoroughly as Nickson has done. Somehow, he has threaded his way through this maze and emerged in a wide, open place beyond the reach of any ideal. His bathers are fit but not, it seems, plagued by demands for perfection. Some look sinewy, others—women among them—are muscular. His images of well-toned females are something subtly new in Western art. Nickson is an acute observer, never letting his command of the figurative canon get in the way of what there is to see. Nor does he let observation undermine anything he has learned from tradition. In his art, present and past—the imperatives of the painterly moment and history's more compelling reminders—are always in play.

The game goes to the present, as I suggested when I said that Nickson has found his way to a region where ideals have no sway. His figures do not pretend to be timeless, and in his works on canvas, no less than in his drawings, the texture of his imagery—evidence of his process—places these works in real time. One can reconstruct, from the pattern of brushstrokes, the emergence of a landscape from blankness, and in the process follow the population of the landscape with figures. One notes, next, just how thoroughly each of his bathers has prepared for the prospect of being seen on the beach. Nickson's notion of the fit physique allows for various degrees of plumpness, to counterbalance any tendency toward excessive scrawniness that his waterside tableaux might present. Yet this balancing is never precise. For all their monumental rigor, his compositions leave plenty of room for quirks and contingencies of form, whether we give his pictures a figurative or a non-figurative reading. Nickson favors

individuality. It is what his art is about. So his bathers find a powerful contrast—and of course an indispensable precedent—in the *Bathers* of Paul Cézanne.

For both painters, bathers are emblems of humanity's place in Nature. Such emblems are anonymous and endlessly reusable. The woman doing headstands appears in several of Nickson's beachscapes, as do figures holding towels parallel to the picture plane, figures entangled in sweatshirts, figures transporting beach chairs, and all the other members of his by now familiar cast of unnamed characters. Likewise, the nudes Cézanne places at water's edge are in some sense the same figures, from picture to picture. Yet his idea of a figure is different from Nickson's. In Cézanne's *Bathers*, a body is first of all a form and only secondarily an image of human anatomy. There is something boneless about his nude figures, a malleability that allows them to echo the limber, curving forms of the trees that fill the skies of these paintings. The point is to assert a unity that establishes the artist's dominance over his subject: nothing is visible unless it reflects the style, the quality, the texture of Cézanne's will. Thus he carries to a brilliant extreme an implication lurking in the art of Eugene Delacroix, Théodore Géricault, and others gathered under the label of Romanticism.

It sounds odd, I know, to link Cézanne—a major exemplar of Modernist painting—to such Romantics as Delacroix and Géricault. Yet the Romantic insistence on the primacy of the artist's sensibility is intensified, not rejected, by Modernism. In any account of this development, the pivotal figure is Edouard Manet, who focused the full force of his temperament on matters we consider purely pictorial: formal structure, technique, and such premises of painting as the flatness and rectangularity of the canvas. Theme and moral import and other matters of burning concern to the Romantics are reduced to pretext or ignored. Thus we understand Manet as breaking with Romanticism and, in the process, launching Modernism.

This understanding is not in error, yet it obscures the supremacy of sensibility in Modernist painting. No less than Delacroix, an exemplary Romantic, the arch-Modernist Piet Mondrian reshapes the world to conform to his temperament—or ego, to use the Romantic term. And so does Henri Matisse, whose pictures of bathers have been as important to Nickson as those of Cézanne.

Modernist and Romantic predecessors, Nickson reshapes the world to his own liking. Though I have been talking about a distinctively Nicksonesque way with the human figure and its way of inhabiting its surroundings, the most dramatic sign of his temperament may well be the light—riotous and serene—that pours from his skies and endows his bathers with a passionate clarity. These figures are calm and yet they are highly charged. This effect is mysterious at first. How can these people, absorbed in nothing very momentous, be so vivid? The woman in *Reflection*, 1989-2005, stands and brushes her hair. Naked, she is attractive and yet she is not putting her attractiveness on display. Nor is she a symbol, the vehicle of some grand meaning. Still, she is a compelling figure. Drawn into the quietude surrounding her, we may not realize how completely the painting depends on her. She matters for us because she matters for the artist, who has imbued her form with his feelings. Cued by a presence shaped by those feelings, our looking turns empathetic. His sensibility becomes our own and we feel the emotional energies that impel Nickson to give the world and its inhabitants a Nicksonesque look.

These remarks do not follow from the old, originally Romantic doctrine now called "expression theory." I am not, in other words, suggesting that Nickson's paintings are devices for conveying emotions from his inward self to that of the viewer, on the model of a telegraph transmitting a message. These days, no one explicitly endorses that rather mechanistic model. Nonetheless, we often assume, half-consciously, that an artwork is a means of communing with

the secret recesses of a painter's soul. Paintings, however, are public things and so they can engage us only by outward means: visible qualities of form and color and texture, some of which coalesce into representational devices of one kind or another. To make sense of a painting is to enter into an ultimately public process of speculation, argument, and provisional conclusion. Interpretation is a form of social behavior. To say that Nickson is an artist of temperament is not to invoke some personal essence, inward and ineffable. It is to say that his art is driven by a bundle of feelings and motives that goes in ordinary speech by the name of personality.

Everybody has one. Some are livelier than others, and certain lively personalities are joined to the interests and abilities that produce works of art. That's all there is to the artist's temperament, and yet it is no small thing. It is what counts, in the realm of the aesthetic, as individuality. More than that, it plays a part in sustaining the idea of the individual. This is a vague idea, no doubt, but it is crucial to our equally vague idea of Western civilization. I suspect that, on occasion, we turn to art not to escape from life but to see its hazards and ambiguities brought under the sway of a commanding individual—reshaped by the certainties of a powerful temperament.

In Nickson's art, this certainty is nowhere more evident than in the splendid subtleties of his light. Each of his paintings has its own weather, specific to it and beyond the scope of meteorology. Nickson is in no way a documentary artist. I have never seen on any beach the quality of light with which he fills *Labyrinth*, 198185, and yet I recognize it and am absorbed by it, feel it on my imaginative skin. The bathers in *Labyrinth* seem, by contrast, to take the light for granted. Or do they? Maybe the gloriously ominous glow of this painting is the sign of an impending storm, and the beach's sparse population is preparing to depart. Maybe not. We can know for certain only that Nickson is in charge of all the complexities of this large pictorial structure.

Moreover, he wields his authority to suit himself, not a supra-personal idea of order of the kind proposed by one sort of classicist or another. That is why it makes sense to list anti-classical Romantics among his predecessors. Nonetheless, Nickson's figures inhabit his compositions in ways that Delacroix does not illuminate. Nor is Cézanne much help, for his bathers have their meaning as echoes of one another and of the trees and clouds that crowd his pictures, pushing compositional structure in the direction of flickering texture. One never looks for individuals in Cézanne's *Bathers*, any more than one wonders about the personalities of the harem-members being slaughtered in Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827. These women are fleshly arabesques, bent to the tyrant's will—though one could argue that the tyrant is Delacroix, whose more ambitious images leave no space for even a hint of any will other than his own.

It is because of his overbearing presence in his art that we call him an exemplar of the Romantic ego and count among his descendents—ideological, not stylistic—such Modernists as Mondrian, who proposed his sublimely idiosyncratic style as a template for revamping the universe. Of course, every artist is willful. Literally speaking, a figure standing on one of Nickson's beaches is no less dependent on its maker's intention than a vertical bar in a canvas by Mondrian or one of Cézanne's bathers, supple and faceless and quasi-abstract. But art is not literal. It is figurative and metaphorical, an invitation to speculation, and Nickson gives us reason to understand his figures as independent of him.

Granted, he often subordinates the forms of their bodies to the large forms of a painting. The knees of *Upside-down Bather*, 1979-82, are intersected by the horizon, and her body marks the vertical axis of the canvas almost exactly. In the depths of *Sandbar Bathers*, 1999-2005, two

figures stretch a towel between them—a green and not quite rectangular recapitulation of the canvas's horizontal shape. Here we see people in the service of planes and edges. Yet a Nickson figure is never completely locked into its role as a pictorial element. His compositions allow every last one of his bathers a sort of elbow room in which to assert a presence equal to the artist's. These grants of freedom are encouraged by the amplitude of his settings. Furthermore, Nickson's way of inventing anatomies, elaborating postures, and rendering flesh—the admiring attentiveness of his brush—persuades us to read a full degree of humanity into his people. Thus a subliminal sociability joins them to one another and to us, despite their self-absorption. Or with the help of it. Nickson's waterside tableaux prompt the thought that having a self in which to be absorbed is possible only in society.

Many artists display political concerns. Many engage the images and products of consumer culture. Few attend to society, as Nickson does with such finesse that hardly anyone has noticed. To find a backdrop for this nearly invisible subject of his, we must look back to the pastorals and *fêtes galantes* that proliferated from the time of the Renaissance until the advent of neoclassicism, in the 18th century. I am thinking of works by Giorgione and Titian, Poussin and Watteau, and of course many others. In pastoral painting, society was reimagined with a somber optimism that defied the chronic violence of ordinary life. Landscapes are welcoming, orderly but not rigidly so. People are calm, sustained by a self-sufficiency that sometimes prompts them to interact and sometimes not. Often, a musical instrument is being played, to provide a symbol of the harmony the painting celebrates. It would be convenient for me if Nickson's beachscapes included symbolism of that sort. That they do not is a sign that he has no interest in a pastoral revival. A further sign is the absence of any literary tradition to which Nickson's paintings might be linked.

Though Watteau's *Embarkation for the Isle of Cythera*, 1717, doesn't pretend to picture an actual place, it does allude to legends that nominate Cythera as the birthplace of Aphrodite, goddess of love. Moreover, this painting invokes the long tradition of poetry dedicated to a Golden Age of ease and harmony. For all the melancholy of Watteau's *Embarkment*, it brings to mind Ovid's image of "a season of everlasting spring, when peaceful zephyrs, with their warm breath, caressed the flowers that sprang up without having been planted." There are no zephyrs on Nickson's beaches, which seem, more often than not, to bake under a sun at once indifferent to the world and capable of filling it with stunning qualities of light. And there are certainly no flowers here. We see no one cavorting. The bathers in Nickson's paintings do not go to the beach to divest themselves of their familiar ways of being, to become innocent, and that is why he can't be called a pastoral painter. He has no inclination to invent Arcadias. So it is easy to overlook the interest he shares with painters who do—or did, before the advent of Romanticism, which reduces everything in a painting to a function of the painter's will.

As in the pastorals of Giorgione, Poussin, and Watteau, so in Nickson's beachscapes: people enjoy a full measure of humanity. Into a crowd of anonymous figures an idea of society insinuates itself. Moreover, it is an attractive idea, one that posits equality for all. In pastoral painting and poetry alike, this social good is sustained by a vaguely Platonic idealism: everyone is equal in the light of ultimate Truth and perfect Beauty. Nickson is no idealist, as I have suggested and his anatomical observations show. Still, he is an optimist who believes, in an entirely unprogrammatic way, that art's images of the world give it a place in the world. The nature of that place varies, as does art itself, and Nickson's originality has long made it difficult to say where he fits into the scheme of things.

By pointing to his pastoral affinities, I mean to suggest that he opens his art to others and to the world, where the social implications of his imagery have their large import. For it is not only the entrancing stillness of Nickson's pictures that draws us to them, nor is it solely their astonishing light. We are attracted as well by figures who remind us of our best idea of ourselves: individuals whose individuality is empty except insofar as we are alive to one another as social beings.