

THE Nation.

Spots, Smudges and Glitter

by BARRY SCHWABSKY

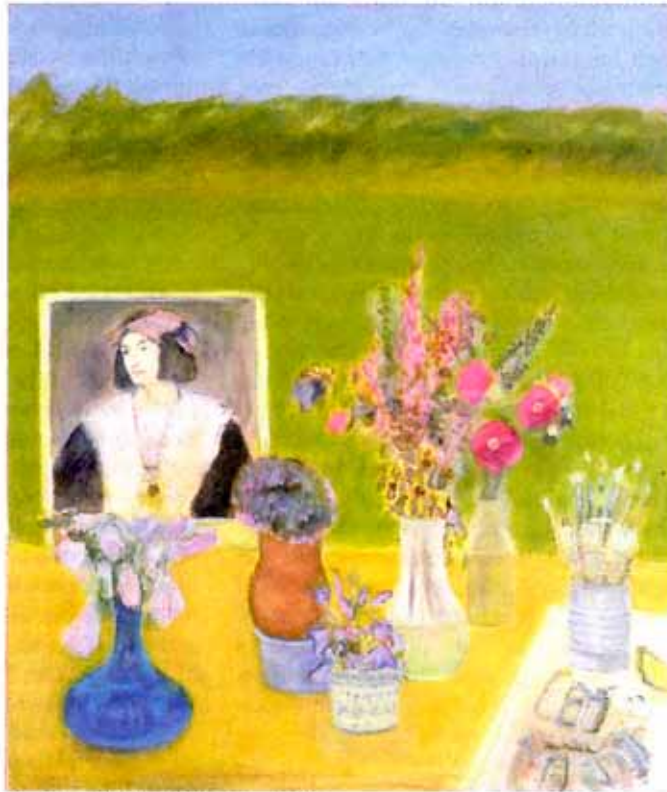
"Painting as we know it," Alberto Giacometti lamented in 1962, near the end of his life, "has no future in our civilization.... There will always be people who

would like to have a picturesque landscape, or a nude, or a bouquet of flowers hanging on the wall," he went on, "but what we call great painting is finished." Giacometti's pessimism aside, it's worth noticing his dismissive citation of those humble, nearly contentless genres that seem to exist for no other reason than to proffer an ordinary pleasure; evidently, landscapes and still lifes represent the abjection of painting. Today, when indifference to Modernist notions of artistic progress has become common, for painting to enact its own abjection by dwelling on the banal or trivial has become an almost self-evident strategy; this must have seemed

a much stranger thing to do back in the '50s, when Abstract Expressionism was at its

pinnacle and reaching for the sublime was second nature for an ambitious painter.

Yet that's exactly what a number of talented and sometimes ambitious painters in New York began to do at the start of that decade—artists of whom the senior figure,



Jane Freilicher's *Man in the Red Cap*, 2006

COURTESY TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

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Fairfield Porter, who died in 1975, remains the best known but among whose ranks were several still active today. These include Jane Freilicher, who recently showed new paintings at New York City's Tibor de Nagy Gallery, where she first exhibited in 1952. Freilicher had been a student of Hans Hoffmann, who spread the gospel of abstraction in America and whose teach-

ings inspired its foremost critical proponent, Clement Greenberg. No provincial, Freilicher was taking a calculated risk: to find a way to paint that could be, as Porter wrote of that first show in 1952, both traditional and radical.

That's more easily said than done, of course. Today, one might say that Freilicher turned out to be neither traditional nor radical, but eccentric. Not that she is indifferent to tradition, as she makes perfectly clear with a painting like *Man in the Red Cap* (2006), in which the still life includes a postcard of a Titian portrait in the Frick Collection. What Freilicher's use of the citation shows is mainly that she has no more intention of entering into direct competition with "what we call great painting" than of trying to criticize or outdo or even simply emulate the cut flowers in the vases and jars around the postcard. Nothing could be further from, say, the agon of Picasso's repeated confrontations with Velázquez; there is no anxiety of influence. The flowers won't last much longer, and perhaps neither will the tradition of which Titian is a primary exemplar. Yet in transcribing their lineaments Freilicher shows little urgency; she seems to view their evanescence with complete composure. Ultimately, her only concern is with what occupies the painting's lower-right corner, namely her own working materials, those brushes that sprout from the coffee can like a sort of austere bouquet and the paint tubes that have deposited their inevitable spots and smudges around her signature, as if to say that her role is simply to draw attention to these otherwise random traces of shimmering and elusive color.

Despite the faux-naïf awkwardness that affects Freilicher's sense of composition, which could almost fool you into thinking she is just an unusually talented Sunday painter, and the immense refinement and tenderness and considered variousness of her touch, at the heart of her work there is also a redoubtable professionalism, a sphinxlike sang-froid. She has often been called a painter's painter, and the reason is that, more than most, her paintings are about nothing but her feeling for the activity of painting—above all, the dichotomy between the visual and the haptic, between the contemplative activity of looking and the manual activity of manipulating materials. Thus, although many of her paintings are pure still life or pure landscape, her best and most characteristic works are still lifes in front of landscapes—a fairly uncommon mixing of genres, otherwise pursued most assiduously by the remarkable but little-known early twentieth-century Ital-

ian painter Filippo de Pisis. The title of the best of Freilicher's recent paintings sums it up: *Still Life and Beyond* (2007). There is the realm of the immediately at-hand, what can be seen and touched: some flowers and the jars and flowerpot that hold them, and a little Venus de Milo statuette, all perched on a windowsill, the leaves of the potted plant spilling over the edge as if into the viewer's space, feigning an even closer contact than usual for Freilicher, who usually keeps her pictures more contained. Then there is the world beyond: the buildings of Manhattan, atmospherically rendered as so many indistinct rectangles, and beyond them the sky—a reality that can be seen but not touched. Things are either very near or very distant; there is no middle ground, nothing to connect them—nothing except the technique through which they are rendered, in which touch and vision become strangely entangled.

There are many parallels between Freilicher and the English painter Rodrigo Moynihan (1910–90), whose paintings were recently at the Robert Miller Gallery in New York City, though the look of their work could hardly be more different. Moynihan is a descriptive realist concerned more with the physical "thereness" of the things he paints than of the paint itself. The same viewer who could mistake Freilicher for naïve would see Moynihan as an academic. But like Freilicher, he expressed his art through still life, and like her art, his is clearly a representational painting that comes in every way "after" abstraction. In the '30s he was one of England's few abstract painters, making very painterly gestural works with restrained color, which would surely have been an influence on the New York Abstract Expressionists of the following decade, had they only been aware of him. And like Freilicher, he is associated with John Ashbery, because Moynihan; his wife, painter Anne Dunn; and Sonia Orwell edited with Ashbery one of the important "little magazines" of the '60s, *Art and Literature*.

Moynihan was an extraordinarily changeable artist. Having made a mark with his first efforts as an abstractionist, he had allied himself by the end of the '30s with the stylistically conservative but socially progressive realism of the Euston Road School; by the mid-'50s he was painting abstractly again. In the early '70s, another volte-face: back to representation. He was in demand as a portraitist—his *Margaret Hilda Thatcher (née Roberts), Baroness Thatcher* (1985) hangs in the National Portrait Gallery—but the most striking

works of his later career were still lifes like those featured at Robert Miller. Given their severe construction, one is hardly surprised to learn that the artist had once painted abstractly; what is surprising is that he seems never to have practiced hard-edged geometrical abstraction. Some of the strongest paintings were in tondo or oval formats rather than the standard rectangle, and these bring out Moynihan's formalism most clearly. *Roman Head, Bottles and Paint Tubes* (1981-82), is a horizontally oriented oval that's divided in half horizontally by the wooden shelf that holds the still life objects, while its lower half is divided in half vertically by the strut that supports the shelf. As quiet and balanced as the painting is, and as reticent as its pale, muted palette makes it seem, there is a deep tension between the rectilinearity of these strong dividing lines—not unlike the horizontal and vertical bands of a Mondrian—and the curves of the canvas's edge, as well as of the stone head that blankly eyes the viewer from its center.

A couple of generations younger than Moynihan or Freilicher, Karen Kilimnik likewise pursues an arguably anachronistic form of representational painting. But there are two big differences between her and Moynihan and Freilicher. One is that Kilimnik, far from working at an eccentric tangent to the mainstream art of her time, has had an enormous influence on it; she has been seen as a pioneer of a new romanticism. The other is that while her two predecessors at least sustained one of the fundamentals of the great tradition of European painting from the Renaissance through Cézanne, namely the representation of perceptible reality, Kilimnik's art leaves all that behind, not for abstraction but for a realm of fantasy, the public emblems of private yearnings: landscapes and flowers are replaced by models and movie stars. Kilimnik shows how prophetic Giacometti really was. There would be no more great painting, he predicted, but "what we call 'bad painting'—that has a future." In recognizing that toy soldiers might be more interesting than most modern sculpture, he unwittingly predicted the present, in which Kilimnik's "bad painting," poignant and reckless, really does have a future.

Since the end of the '80s, the material of Kilimnik's art has been a hopeless identification with figures like Kate Moss, the Romanovs and Marie Antoinette; a fan's obsessive fascination with TV series and movies like *Heathers* and magazines like *Vogue*; and an adoration of the sentimental paintings of Sir Thomas

Lawrence and Jean-Baptiste Greuze, and of subjects like horses, cats, dogs and ballerinas. Sounding more like a profile subject in a teen magazine than an artist impressed with the due gravity of a retrospective, Kilimnik explained to Ingrid Schaffner, the curator of her 2007 exhibition at the ICA in Philadelphia (now at the MCA Chicago, through June 8), "I love ghost stories, Agatha Christie mysteries, Edgar Allan Poe, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones...and I have always wanted to be a fashion designer."

This isn't what it sounds like: a new twist on Pop Art. After all, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and their contemporaries

crossed the imagery of mass marketing with the blunt formal reductions of abstract art to create an art that was big, bold, cool, crisp and seemingly impersonal; they parodied Modernism by jettisoning its intransigently utopian content while maintaining its equally intransigent formal values. The same is true for much of the other art that's been called postmodern, but from the beginning Kilimnik's was different, returning to the romantic emphasis on subjectivity and yearning—yet relocating subjectivity in the effects of the media. Far from Pop's cool, Kilimnik discomfits by being almost embarrassingly sincere, even down to the

The March

There were two or three stragglers who couldn't keep up with the rest. I said to the captain, "What should we do about the stragglers?" He said, "Shoot them. Stragglers are often captured by the enemy and tortured until they reveal our whereabouts. It is best to not leave them behind." I went back to the stragglers and told them that my orders were to shoot them. They started running to catch up with the rest. Then a sniper was shot out of a tree. "Good work," said the captain. Then we climbed a mountain. Once we were on top, the captain said, "I'll give a hundred dollars to anyone who can spot the enemy." Nobody could. "We'll spend the night here," the captain said. I was appointed first lookout. I smoked a cigarette and looked into the forest below through my night-vision glasses. Something moved, but it was hard to tell what it was. There was a lot of movement, but it didn't seem like men, more like animals. I soon fell asleep. When Juarez tapped me on the shoulder to tell me he would take over, he said, "You were asleep, weren't you?" I stared at him with pleading eyes. "The captain would have you shot, you know?" I didn't say anything. The next morning Juarez was missing. "Captain, do you want me to send out a search party?" I said. "No, I always suspected he was with the enemy," he said. "Today, we will descend the mountain." "Yes, sir, captain," I said. The men tumbled and rolled, bounced up against trees and boulders. Some of them broke their arms and noses. I was standing next to the captain at the bottom of the mountain. "Shoot them all!" he ordered. "But, captain, they're our men," I said. "No they're not. My men were well-trained and disciplined. Look at this mess here. They are not my men. Shoot them!" he again ordered. I raised my rifle, then turned and smacked him in the head with the butt of it. Then I knelt and handcuffed him. The soldiers gathered about me and we headed for home. Of course, none of us knew where that was, but we had our dreams and our memories. Or I think we did.

JAMES TATE

smallest detail, like the nearly unnoticeable dabs of glitter that appear on the walls among the paintings she recently showed at New York City's 303 Gallery. In these paintings of skies, seas and mountains, Kilimnik seemed to have cast aside the whimsical and apparently jejune subject matter with which she has long concerned herself. Had she taken up abstraction, and indeed the monochrome? One might have thought so, seeing the blue, black and white tondi in the gallery's first room. But not so fast—their titles indicate that they are anything *but* abstractions: the black one, for instance, is *coal fog over london, nighttime, 1804*. This is not abstraction, but no more is it representation in the traditional sense. Here, language and concrete visual sensation intertwine to evoke nostalgia for what's never been experienced.

Painter Amy Sillman puts it well: "Neither representations nor simulacra, these figures are displacements, emptied presences that allow something else to pour out: grief, ruins, memories, stories from old worlds..." She's talking about the paintings of Ellen Berkenblit but could just as easily be writing about Kilimnik. Berkenblit is not among the artists who've been influenced by Kilimnik, but her reception by the contemporary art world probably has been. She was a regular on the East Village scene of the mid-'80s, but after 1986 she stopped exhibiting for a time, re-emerging in 1992, when Kilimnik had already begun to clear the way for the acceptance of a new or hitherto overlooked kind of casually subjective, non-Expressionistic, post-Pop, image-based painting. Berkenblit's paintings have long featured the same wide-eyed woman in profile. At the Anton Kern Gallery in New York, she recently showed nine large black-and-white paintings, all dominated by just the head of her cartoony protagonist; at first glance it seemed impossible to see anything but this one relentlessly reiterated countenance, so blandly incommunicative. After a few minutes in the gallery, though, the face had practically disappeared, serving as little more than the empty focal point around which swirled storms of abstract brushwork interspersed with stars, flowers and other decorative motifs. The titles of the paintings underlined their abstractness; *Horses on a Hill* (2008) has no horses in it, and *Heart Shaped* (2007) depicts no heart. These paintings are about the gorgeousness of black paint but also about something harder to put your finger on: something like the troubled atmosphere around a self that's somehow both inescapable and depleted. ■