

AS VARIOUSLY AS POSSIBLE: LARRY RIVERS AND GRACE HARTIGAN IN THE WORLD

By Peter Frank

LARRY

*Watching the muddy light attach
some resemblances, you took
my letters from your drawers and said
"You were careful to me." Some look....*

POEM FOR A PAINTER

*... Such a trough as I'm in! blind in the rain
The minotaur, hero, struggles. Embrace
engulfs him, and no Muse but the whore. Grace,
you are the flowergirl on the candled plain...*

-- Frank O'Hara

Painters – and artists in other media, too, but especially painters – love poetry. They understand implicitly that poetry is painting with words and phrases and phonemes. And they inhale the heady freedom of lingual sound carrying rather than conveying meaning, a process of verbal abstraction that even the most exacting and veristic painters share – or at least seek to share – as underpinning to their pictures.

And poets love painting, and art in general, because they see the same conjurations they effect on the limited field of the page writ large, as it were, on canvas or on a pedestal or all over a room. Visual art serves the banquet for which poetry is the recipe. There can even be room for writing *in* the art, and then the words add their cursive crackle or printed pulse to the image-field.

Most civilizations conflate their written and pictorial media; but some regard this conflation as a genre in itself, a cross-disciplinary border culture where the poets and painters (prime but not alone among artists of all kinds) form a single cohort. Paris between the symbolists and the surrealists hosted one such society; the postwar years in New York saw another.

"The New York School" is an appellation given visual artists and poets of the 1950s and '60s working, or at least participating, in a discourse maintained on the island of Manhattan (and attendant country spots). In literature, the term denotes a style, or at least attitude, featuring an admixture of the sophisticated, even arcane, and the quotidian. This approach was, and remains, notable for (among other traits) verbal elasticity, irrepressible humor, and provocative

non sequitur, all betraying a heritage in the modernist avant garde (surrealism, dada, futurism). In visual art, the “New York School” label is less descriptive or proscriptive; it certainly pertains to abstract expressionism, but implies that gestural abstraction was not the only style available. Geometric abstractionists fell under this rubric, and so did a range of figurative painters and sculptors. If anything, the quintessential New York School artists situated themselves equidistantly from all possible manners, merging and marrying the painterly and the precise, the image and the imageless.

“The New York School,” then, connotes a time and place, a milieu of artists rather than a movement. There were declarations galore, but no unifying manifesto. The New York School was a School of Athens, a living dialogue that entertained all ideas but elided all dictates. (Almost all: Clement Greenberg’s teleology of an ultimate abstraction held persistent sway, becoming formula for some, poison for others.)

The New York School was a confluence, indeed a community, of artists and writers, a cold-water-loft La Bohémérie of aesthetic, intellectual, and personal intimacy. In this regard the individual who most galvanized the New York School ethos was Frank O’Hara, an erudite, charismatic poet besotted infectiously with both life and art. As critic and ultimately Museum of Modern Art curator, O’Hara was a NY School BMOC, but did not arrogate power as other critics and curators were wont. Rather, he considered himself as among the artists, responding to their work, and to them, spontaneously and broadly.

Among O’Hara’s closest friends – and among the artists to whom he was most devoted – were Grace Hartigan and Larry Rivers. However chaste he was with one and however brief was his affair with the other, these two artists and their work inspired O’Hara’s passion as did few others. Friends themselves, Rivers and Hartigan employed styles that exploited the inherent heterodoxy of the New York School discourse, irking those who shrank from the School’s rich diversity. To wit, both were dedicated to figurative painting, albeit a figurative painting that engaged almost nothing of traditional representation.

Was this gentle defiance of their colleagues’ proscriptions a result of Hartigan’s and Rivers’ closeness to O’Hara? And perhaps to his fellow poets as well? Yes, it would seem; but it wasn’t their rebellious spirit the poets bolstered so much as it was the two painters’ idiosyncratic exploration of figuration itself. The rollicking embrace of the real and surreal that characterizes not only O’Hara’s poetry, but Kenneth Koch’s, Barbara Guest’s, John Ashbery’s, James Schuyler’s, Edwin Denby’s, Kenward Elmslie’s, and others’ exemplified a vision that beheld daily life as a crazy-quilt amalgam of fantasy and reality, the invented and the extant, the ordinary as the remarkable.

Rivers and Hartigan also took courage from the gravitational pull they and their fellow painters constantly felt from the real world. Willem and Elaine DeKooning both circled back constantly to the figure. Alfred Leslie and Howard Kanovitz went stark realist in the mid-60s. And painters as deep into the scene as Fairfield Porter, Robert De Niro Sr., Jane Freilicher, Nell Blaine, John Button, and so many others never quit the image, finding new ways to paint it learned from abstract expressionism.

Like some of the above, Larry Rivers always painted things he saw. Like others, Grace Hartigan emerged as an abstractionist but shed that skin to return as a figurative painter, working both from the observed and from the imagined. Observing the real and/or the imagined is what the New York School poets did – and in O’Hara’s case, set out to do – and it gave Hartigan and Rivers a verbal mirror in which to see their practice reflected. It was not O’Hara’s intention to persuade his painter friends to paint the “external” world. (In fact, his momentous falling out with Hartigan in 1960 may have been over her rededication to the figure.) But his example, at least as much as that of other painters, supported the two artists’ representational impulse.

As various works in this show demonstrate, both Rivers and Hartigan were friendly, and frequently collaborated, with other writers besides O’Hara, especially after his untimely death. But the art of the two painters was inarguably forged by its contact with the charismatic poet, by his love of the everyday and the mythic in equal measure, by his absurdist wit and romantic vigor, by his sudden turns of logic and image and sound. O’Hara’s is a poetry that keeps the reader in constant motion, slightly off kilter, as if learning a new dance step and loving it. Different as their own styles are from each other’s, this giddy amplification of sensation inflects the art of both painters.

Historians have considered the literature of the New York School, especially that of O’Hara, as a prefiguration of the Pop impulse in visual art. As a poet, O’Hara was as responsive to brand names and urban environments as any billboard-based aesthetic. As a critic, he supported less the image-dependent Pop artists such as Warhol and Indiana than he did proto- and quasi-Pop fabricators like Rauschenberg, Johns, and Oldenburg. Rivers’ work, of course, falls under this latter rubric, and spoke to O’Hara’s own Pop preferences in a two-way loop of influence.

With hindsight, though, we can see that various figurative tendencies in the art of the New York School, whether manifested by Porter or DeKooning, Hartigan or Rivers, lay some groundwork for New York Pop, its way smoothed (whether he liked it or not) by O’Hara’s poetry. Scale and rendition, magnified by the ambitions of abstract expressionism itself and skewed by the incipient Pop spirit into a dialogue between the high-toned and the profane, is readily witnessed in New York School poetry (O’Hara’s especially) and also in the New York School approach(es) to figuration, Hartigan’s and Rivers’ in particular.

Throughout their careers both Rivers and Hartigan faced repeated rejection, not just for their insistent reliance on referential imagery, but for the peculiarities of their styles. Rivers could oscillate between the virtuosic and the illustrational in the same artwork – indeed, in the same corner of the same artwork. Such deft eclecticism offended purists. Hartigan’s stylized characterizations likewise struck many as cartoonish and insouciant – and in her case, a betrayal of abstraction along the lines of Philip Guston’s. But the multiple conditions of both Rivers’ figuration and Hartigan’s – the zigzagging references, the conflation of the elegant and the crude, the Matissean refusal to yield entirely to either the picture or the meaning – define their own synthesis; pre-modern in their self-consciously admitted antecedents, they are post-modern in their diction.

How post-modern were Grace Hartigan and Larry Rivers – and, for that matter, Frank O’Hara – is a related topic but a whole other can of worms. Suffice it to say that these two painters who emerged in mid-20th century and worked into the 21st left bodies of work whose apparent contradictions are stylistic – or, more accurately, attitudinal – quirks, anomalies that make them more interesting not least because they reveal the practical debt owed to, and flavor shared with, the poetry of the painters’ mutual friend. Not a one of the three was frivolous – and not a one of them didn’t have fun.

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