

Figurative Painting

David Park: Fixed Subjects and Lyricism & Light at the Palo Alto Cultural Center

BY RANDAL DAVIS

Two concurrent exhibitions at the Palo Alto Cultural Center bear comment together. *David Park: Fixed Subjects* functions doubly, as a survey spanning the middle 1930s to his final works on paper, and as a more thematic investigation of his oeuvre. The accompanying *Lyricism & Light* is a more problematic reflection on the legacy of what the exhibition catalogs somewhat portentously term the "Bay Area Figurative Movement."

As it implies, *Fixed Subjects* examines the recurrence of particular subjects and compositional structures through markedly distinct stylistic phases in the artist's career. In consequence, this comparative method, though generally successful, throws into high relief, perhaps inadvertently, discontinuities in Park's career—stylistic changes so pronounced as to suggest three quite different artists. The eponymous fixity is thus no less elusive, an irony which neither curator Signe Mayfield nor Nancy Boas (another catalog contributor) seems to find conspicuous. The reason for this, presumably, is Park's eminence in the pantheon of the Bay Area Figurative Movement—and *Fixed Subjects* apparently intends nothing beyond celebration of that status.

These discontinuities, however, bedevil *Lyricism & Light* in its effort to "determine painterly concerns consonant with Park's late works." One might object that the "painterly concerns" evidenced in Park's work of 1953-54 are not those of 1959-

60—admitting, indeed inviting, divergent developments—but the works of *Lyricism & Light*, on evidence of their dominant chromatic restraint, seem most closely associated with the Park of the middle fifties. Manuel Neri and Nathan Oliveira, however, given pride of place in *Lyricism & Light*, embody such divergent paths; this, in addition to their own canonical status, scarcely less than Park's, makes their implied position here as legatees most curious.

The notional "consonance" which premises the exhibition is, finally, an elision. Its precise sense remains unexamined, leaving one to conclude that it is less emphatic than "derived from," but, unfortunately, may be little more than a euphemism for resemblance. Momentary pleasure aside—*Lyricism & Light* is, on balance, a handsome assortment of work—the exhibition oscillates erratically between these possibilities.

Christopher Brown's impressive *1946* (1992) is an astute inclusion, clearly related to what Richard Diebenkorn aptly termed Park's textural "fabric of persons," and would have borne more sustained analysis in the exhibition's halting articulation of historical context. At the same time, Yale Schively's lovely and disquieting *Coast I* (1991-92) has

much to do with the traditions of American realism, but little in common with Park's mediation of abstract expressionism and modernist figuration.

These inconsistencies derive from Mayfield's admirable yet overly expansive sense of "painterly concerns," which, she asserts, includes as well such disparate properties as "genuine humanism," "romantic imagination," "the subjective filters of memory, intuition and sentiment," and so on. That these properties are not, strictly, "painterly concerns" is, of course, obvious enough; what is troublesome is their too easy conflation.

This is nowhere more evident than in the two works by Deborah Oropallo, the monotype *Morro Castle* (1988) and the recent book, *Fall From Grace: The Six Wives of Henry VIII*



Christopher Brown, *1946, 1992*, oil on canvas, 100-1/4" x 88-3/4", at the Palo Alto Cultural Center.

(1993). The latter, particularly, is a work of substantial formal complexity and affective subtlety, the decoding of which might more profitably begin not from the precedent of Park in the 1950s, but from, say, Jasper Johns's work of the same period. This is less a matter of disingenuous curatorial revisionism than a certain willed myopia, an ahistorical mystification that serves neither tradition nor current practice. ❖

Lyricism & Light and *David Park: Fixed Subjects* through April 24 at the Palo Alto Cultural Center, 1313 Newell Rd., Palo Alto.

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A conversation with Christopher Brown

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

As a graduate student at the University of California, Davis, painter Christopher Brown worked with Manuel Neri. "I saw him as a serious artist at a level that I had never seen before I arrived in California," Brown said. "There were good artists and teachers in Illinois, where I came from, but people like Neri, De Forest, Thiebaud, Arneson, Wiley and other artists I met here had an extreme level of life commitment to art." Brown went on to join the faculty at the University of California, Berkeley; his own work has been described as a balancing on the line between representation and abstraction.

Artweek You've had personal associations with several of the original Bay Area Figurative painters. Did you come to California to study this way of painting?

Christopher Brown When I was in high school, my art teacher had a two-volume set of *Art USA Now*. One of the artists I remember from the book was Paul Wonner. I loved his painting. A man was sitting on the edge of a bed in the bedroom. I thought it was an incredible painting and it made me want to paint. At the same time, I started to find out more about Diebenkorn, and I remember a



Chester Arnold, *Modernism: The Final Solution*, 1992, oil on canvas, 64" x 72", at the Palo Alto Cultural Center.

Sports Illustrated with paintings of Wimbledon by Wayne Thiebaud. I never played tennis, but even at fifteen I thought the paintings were great. I was finding out about all these Bay Area painters and feeling an affinity with them without knowing much about them. But as it turned out, the things I learned from them don't have much to do with painting directly. They have more to do with attitudes about being an artist and about life.

AW *What is the most important aspect of those attitudes?*

CB A reverence for the iconoclasm of the individual. With Thiebaud, it was almost formalist. He didn't want to be seen as part of a Pop Art school. He was emphatic about that in a diplomatic and polite way. With Joan Brown, it was a very hard-nosed kind of iconoclasm: "I'm different from other people and I don't want to be like anybody else and don't try to make me." In the course of conversation I learned a lot about their lives and the extreme difficulties that had forged their personalities as artists. It made them feel that they didn't owe anything to anybody. They'd had bad experiences with New York dealers who wanted them to be a certain way, and it had turned them against that scene, like a bad romance. It was the opposite of what I heard from my friends in New York, who would talk

about what you had to do to make it. The Bay Area attitude was to forget all that. Just do your work in your studio and that stuff will take care of itself.

AW *Do you think that an allegiance to the figure may have been part and parcel with this attitude?*

CB With someone like David Park, maybe Bischoff and Diebenkorn early on, that may have been true. But after they acted as snowplows for everybody else, it was a lot easier for other artists to follow that path. For artists like De Forest and Joan Brown, the second generation group, I don't think it was so much of a question. They came of age at a time when it seemed possible to do anything and be anything as an artist. In a sense, what the Bay Area artists gave each other was the strength to simply do their own thing.

Figuration was part of it but they were also good friends with people like Frank Lobdell and Fred Martin, who were not doing figurative painting but shared the attitude. The attitude transcended issues of style. You could say that the inheritors of that ethic were conceptual artists like Jim Melchert and Howard Fried. And I think of David Ireland in the same way.



David Park, *Rowboat & Canoe*, ca. 1936, oil on canvas, 28" x 22", at the Palo Alto Cultural Center. (Photo: E. B. Bigelow.)

That to me is the Bay Area tradition.

AW *Whom do you regard as contemporaries who share your particular sensibility?*

CB That's a good question. We're in the midst of such a diverse period. I don't feel a group cohesion.

AW *So you feel, then, that there's less cohesion for your particular generation than there was for the older painters?*

CB Yes. I used to talk to Elmer Bischoff about that. I asked him what it was like to be in the Bay Area in the late forties and early fifties. He said that you didn't want to go to bed at night and you couldn't wait to get up in the morning because there was a sense of such intense excitement about being an artist, about being here and being part of something. The year before he died, he told me that, unlike other times in his life which seemed important in retrospect, during those years he knew, as it was happening, that he was part of something terrifically exciting and important. Then it faded and changed.

AW *Do you think it changed as the art scene grew, as more people became involved?*

CB Geography always has a lot to do with these things. The fact that the art scene was centered in North Beach and that it was all happening right in that ten-block area meant that you were continually running into people who had the same interests. It's much more dispersed now. It's almost as easy for me to go to New York as it is to go to San Francisco. I'm also interested in international painters, people like Lucian Freud.

AW *Can one look at Lucian Freud and immediately know he's not a Bay Area figurative painter? How do his concerns differ from, say, those of*

Park or Bischoff?

CB Bay Area figurative painting was characterized by its affinity with abstraction. The organization of the surface transcends the figure, making painting as an investigation much more important than subject matter. In someone like Lucian Freud, that's not true. Freud's process is very specific to an investigation of the figure. He couldn't go out and do a painting of a car and produce the same kind of intensity, whereas Diebenkorn proved that use of the figure didn't make any difference. That's one of the things that differentiates a West Coast style. I think it goes back to the 1920s and the start of the teaching of modern art at Berkeley, back to people like Worth Ryder, Earle Loran and Hans Hofmann, who taught a strict structuralist, modernist attitude about painting. That attitude permeated the Bay Area completely.

AW *Would you say geographic isolation helped to define a more specific Bay Area character?*

CB To me, California represents a faith in intuition over intellect, whereas New York represents much more faith in the intellect and a certain disdain for intuition. These barriers get broken down more and more, but in 1960 that was definitely true. We're talking about someone like the Buddhist teacher Alan Watts in California versus Clement Greenberg in New York. Two totally different ways of thinking about what the world is.

AW *If one is dealing with intuitive material, they're also dealing with the body and have to be aware of sensation. Do you think that a predilection for intuition might also have predisposed people to consider the figure?*

CB For anybody who paints the figure, I think that there is that relationship. There is a deeply sympathetic response when you paint the figure. I feel it as a body experience—I draw a leg and I feel that in my leg. It's not at the level of an idea. It's a very physical thing. When I say those things, I think of Joan Brown, who was such a strong teacher of those kinds of experiences. Joan and Elmer had a phrase for the importance of intuition: "Follow your nose." Elmer said that to Joan when she was a student, and she passed it on to her students. ❖

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