

## Figure paintings today are not made in heaven

A younger figure painter, who has worked his way to the nude from Abstract-Expressionism, reveals that things are more difficult than they seem

**A**ncient Indian artists practiced certain Yoga exercises by which they achieved totally blank states of mind. Their minds then proceeded to draw from heaven, by way of the "immanent space in the heart," images of God in one or another of his aspects. The imager had to realize complete self-identification with the image and hold that form in his mind, for it was the model from which he executed his work. The imager *became* the image.

Did the painter of *Marilyn Monroe* become her? Did she really look like that when he welcomed her in the "immanent space in his heart"? No, for art comes from art as well as from heaven. DeKooning's *Monroe* is shredded, Action-Painted, New York-anguished. She reveals her epoch even as Rubens' *Helene Fourment* reveals hers.

It seems madness on the part of any painter educated in the twentieth-century modes of picture-making to take as his subject the naked human figure, conceived as a self-contained entity possessed of its own dignity, existing in an inhabitable space, viewed from a single vantage point. For as artists we are too ambitious and conscious of too many levels of meaning. The description of the surface of things seems unworthy. Most of us would rather be Freudian, Jungian, Joycean and portray the human by implication rather than imitation.

To many artists, Mondrian's late paintings are as close to describing nature and life forces as we should get. The Expressionist element in Abstract-Expressionism involves as much human emotion as is necessary, while a hard-edged stripe on a flat background is a mirror of the soul. "Anti-art" junk is an accurate description of our environment, and Happenings depict our states of mind.

Yet there will always be those who want to make paintings of the human form with its parts all where they should be, in spite of Progress.

Two tyrannies impose themselves on the artist who would try. One is the concept of the flat picture plane; the other may be termed the "roving point-of-view." Both have radically changed our way of seeing pictures and have conditioned those values that lead us to judge what a "convincing painting" is. We all bow low to them for it seems that we cannot overthrow them. But our battles with them sometimes produce paintings that are exciting in the resulting tensions. Unfortunately, too many easy compromises are being applauded in certain fashionable quarters.

There are ways to make the figure "acceptable" to the taste-makers of today. All paintings have implied meanings, but some implications are more in line with current popular

sympathies than others, and one path towards acceptability lies in the artist's choosing the proper kind of implication. Even the illusionists, those practitioners of perspective and chiaroscuro, find acceptance if they introduce lots of psychological overtones. The hallucinated verbal descriptions of Faulkner are given their visual counterpart in windswept Maine interiors. The gently decaying interiors and inhabitants of East Hampton and other Victorian places imply Chekopian degeneracy. Self-portraits loom behind their picture planes like the face of Dostoyevsky writing notes from the underground.

The monster image also affords many graceful solutions. The mythological half-beast-half-woman, ambiguous in meaning, is delightful. Scorched, charred, flattened out people have a ready market; this attractive Dubuffet formula does not disturb the picture plane while presenting an evocative image, primitivistic, apocalyptic, contemporary. Copied comic-strips and copied collages of commercial-art fragments are a bright new variant on the market. They have the built-in advantages of demonstrating our shallow America even to the blind, while remaining flat patterns.

Other paths toward acceptance lie in the direction of finding the kind of technique that announces the artist's avant-gardism, but allows him to show his great love for humanity. Some of our West Coast [Continued on page 51]

Philip Pearlstein: *Two Models*, ink.  
Frumkin Gallery, New York

