

LETTERS TO THE EDITORS



MORE ADO ABOUT PAINTING

To the Editors:
Raphael Rubinstein's recent article "To Rest Lightly on the Earth" [Feb. '12], a sequel to his 2009 piece "Provisional Painting," is indeed both interesting and timely. His notion that painting can have new relevance in contemporary art under the guise of "provisionality" is, of course, to be understood in light of the enormous backlash against painting in the post-WWII art world, following the achievements of Newman, Pollock, Rothko and others. At that time, many commentators believed it would be impossible to continue making modern painting after Abstract Expressionism, and that, as a consequence, the medium could be considered exhausted.

Rubinstein centers his latest article on Giacometti's legendary artistic pessimism and his declaration that it was "impossible" to achieve what he was looking for in art. However, one has to ask whether the postwar condemnation of painting and Giacometti's doubt spring from the same source. Giacometti, after all, left us an extraordinary oeuvre. It may rest on an esthetic of "provisionality," as Rubinstein says, but it achieves a paradoxical permanence. Giacometti's difficult quest for artistic achievement is based on the model of Cézanne, who famously despaired of being

able to complete a painting. Yet, again, when art historians look back to Cézanne, what strikes them is the monumentality of his achievement. Today we appreciate the resilience of Cézanne's and Giacometti's visions. Their work was founded not on classical principles but on something new and innovative—a modern esthetic.

Might the postwar antipathy to painting really spring, then, from discomfort with the originality of modern art? We know that the 19th-century Academy, which fostered the mainstream contemporary art of the day, violently opposed all the great modern artists: Géricault, Courbet, Monet et al. Is it possible that this conservative school of thought continued on into the 20th century in a different guise? Did a new Academy take shape in the 20th century, founded by Marcel Duchamp and André Breton?

Modern art itself was born out of an engagement with the history of art, examples of which Napoleon brought back to the Louvre as the spoils of his conquests. At the beginning of the 19th century, Géricault may have been the first to recommend to young artists that they should study the "art of the museums." At the century's end, Cézanne was still recommending the same apprenticeship, in conjunction with observations of nature. In contrast, Duchamp is on record declaring his aversion to the history of art: "The Old Masters, the old things . . . All that disgusted me." As for Breton, he specifically identified Cézanne as an object of ridicule: "Cézanne, for whom I have absolutely no regard and whose personal outlook and artistic ambition, in spite of his panegyrists, I have always judged to be imbecilic." Is it not such a view that has led us inevitably to the cynicism of Damien Hirst?

Paul Rodgers
New York

RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN replies: *It may be true that Damien Hirst's paintings proclaim an esthetic (and ethical) position very, very far removed from the artists I discuss in "To Rest Lightly on the Earth." Almost 10 years ago I wrote: "Looking back, I think the scale of the crisis [in the reception of painting] first hit me when I noticed that Damien Hirst's visually and conceptually inert 'Spot Paintings'—grids of circles in pleasant, randomly sequenced colors—were being taken seriously by American viewers and institutions. This was a sign that our expectations of painting had been drastically, even tragically reduced."* ["A Quiet Crisis," A.i.A., Mar. '03]

Even so, I find it difficult to subscribe to Rodgers's notion that Duchamp and Breton founded an antimodern academy that led to a postwar "backlash against painting" and, eventually, to Hirst's "cynicism." As a canny tactician of the avant-garde, Breton may have lashed out at Cézanne, but he was hardly an enemy of painting. More importantly, Duchamp's brief against painting has provided the medium with an enduring, inspiring challenge. Consider, for instance, two of my unnamed painters (David Hammons and Sergej Jensen): their contributions to contemporary painting would be unthinkable without Duchamp's legacy. And as long as I'm naming names, let's not forget the estimable Dana Frankfort.

ARTY ARKANSAS

To the Editors:
Steven C. Dubin's article "The Meet and Greet Museum" [Feb. '12] is one of the best, if not the best, critique of the Crystal Bridges Museum of Art I have read. Many other pieces about the museum seem written by someone with a score to settle from the War Between the States. And the local or regional write-ups naturally tend to be "Chamber of Commerce" material. The issue of geography and the local people of northwest Arkansas (as well as southwest

Missouri and eastern Oklahoma) is more complicated than the cursory "hillbilly" or "Walmart shopper" stereotypes too often applied to them. As Dubin clearly points out, in this day of instant, global communication and easy travel, there are very few hinterlands, especially in the U.S. Dubin actually went to the trouble to get out a map and see exactly where Bentonville is! And for that I applaud him.

If you simply take the time to stop and observe those coming through the doors of Crystal Bridges, you see a cross section of people who look very much like "average Americans" from any town or city—some familiar with art and some wanting to learn. I especially enjoy noting the young professionals and the college students who come up from Fayetteville to visit, often on dates. Apparently the new thing for singles around here is not dinner and a movie, but dinner and art. Alice Walton has tried to explain over the last several years that the museum, being in Bentonville, will have a "sense of place." I think most will get that message and its inherent populism, especially in the context of "American art" actually being exhibited right in the middle of America.

Ted Talley
Bentonville, Ark.

CORRECTONS

In David Ebony's obituary for John Chamberlain [Feb. '12, p. 29], the artist's date of death is mistakenly given as Dec. 20. Chamberlain died on Dec. 21, 2011.

In "The Biggest Truism of All" [Feb. '12, p. 24], Cowboys Stadium's high-definition screen should have been given as 160 feet wide (approx. 53 yards), not 70 yards. Other members of the stadium's Art Council are Melissa Meeks, director of Two by Two for AIDS and Art, and Jeffrey Grove, senior curator of contemporary art at the Dallas Museum of Art.

Art in America welcomes correspondence from its readers. All letters are subject to editing and condensation.
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