

My Tragicomic Theater

When I first posed a model to represent a friend, who had died some years before, I had an epiphany. As the work came into resolution, a disquieting but not unpleasant sensation overcame me; it was as if I had been able to call the spirit of that person into my studio, to be alone with her again.

I wasn't quite sure what to make of it, but it did suggest that there was something significant to be gained by utilizing the images of people I knew and cared about. Later, I realized that I had chanced upon what Leone Battista Alberti called painting's fundamental magic: to call forth those who are absent, to bring them into the light, to give them the semblance of a living presence. The painter as shaman.

As I work, I am guided and inspired by this elegiac impulse through the sensations and feelings that emerge. Each painting becomes a reflecting pool in which I recast emotional states and stories about people. What possesses me is the existential drama of the shifting self and others, the unspoken thoughts and sensations that create a sense of our paradoxical individuality. An event or dilemma in a person's life is often the initial point of departure. To the extent it is possible, I empathize with those I paint, in order to express them better, recognizing that they are also emanations of myself. Some images define scenes that evolve into metaphors of larger social realities.

These works must have a certain strangeness or they would convey no inhabited depths or value. Thus realism, by itself, seems unable to transmute thought into dream. The usefulness of paint's materiality creates the craft of painting but it is the pictorial illusion of the world which creates the essential poetic reality.

Painting for me has continued to manifest itself as a kind of theater in which I become both director and puppet master. This became clear in my early vaudeville paintings; at that time, I was first influenced by the narrative aspects of Trecento painting and particularly Sieneese painting. It was in vaudeville acts and the circus sideshow that I found allegories for the life of being an artist; performing gender and otherness, in the theatrical display of the apparent monstrousness of our secret selves.

In this way, painting is a way of knowing what I truly feel, what really matters. As I have moved between mythic perspectives on issues both local and global, from intimate relations and social isolation, to world events and daily strife, and addiction and madness in my own neighborhood. I have come to see my larger project as an exploration of the tragicomic theater of life, a concept that stretches back to Plato and Plotinus.

The boundary between fictive and authentic presentations of self has long been a source of moral and existential anxiety. In images that implicitly expose their own artifice, both painting and to some extent, reality, are conceived in theatrical terms. In some of my recent staging's, crisis, brutality, and violence prevail, to stand against the contemporary drive to dismiss the facts of history, in order to efface memory. Perhaps some of those disinterested viewers who would look away will come to experience empathy.

Perhaps.

For me, certain of these scenes have not been comfortable to look upon, let alone paint. Will I find them easier to bear, in time? These paintings, as a body of works, act to gather up the spirits depicted into a prolonged present. In each work, figures enact a pivotal scene where the often incomprehensible is given shape by a haunted and melancholic imagining. This unveiling of appearances—a shamanistic divination, of a sort—manifests a complex spectral mystery .