

Poetic Blend Of Day And Dream

by Karl Ruhrberg

"In January of 1979 I went to live and work in Berlin at the invitation of the D.A.A.D. (German Academic Exchange Service)," wrote New York artist Howard Kanovitz. He did not go empty handed. In a retrospective at the Akademie der Künste which encompassed more than 200 paintings, pastels, drawings, and installations, the artist established himself as one of the leading realists of his country. "Howard Kanovitz paints realistic paintings for which the term 'realism' is too narrow," wrote former president of the Akademie der Künste, Werner Duttman: "His paintings do not show reality as such, but rather express doubt in what normally is taken for reality." In the meantime, the work of the Document participant (1972 and 1977) has become less fashionable, as have all types of so called 'neo-realism' one would think that after years of abstract art's dominance, a new type of realism would be welcomed with open arms as a counter-balance to the harsher minimal and conceptual art forms.

It might at least have been embraced with the same warmth that Pop Art once was, although the latter never enjoyed the popularity of Pop music. Intellectual art, however, rarely receives an instant-majority vote. The serious form of American realism as it is represented by Richard Estes, Chuck Close, Philip Pearlstein, Alex Katz, and Kanovitz, is not what the public had hoped for. It does not consist of mirror-like naturalism or a predictable pseudo-romantic idyll. Discussion of the movement, with its variety of contrasts in East and West, in Europe and America, has always suffered from a surprising lack of differentiation. It seems to have ceased altogether now that an artist of Gerald Richter's caliber produces abstract paintings. Many have fallen into the bad habit of remaining silent about what doesn't conform to the mold. "Realism doesn't satisfy the public," says sixty-year-old Kanovitz. In a refreshing way, he does not present the soul of his art on a silver platter. Refraining from simply copying visible reality, he instead questions it, and despite exactness of detail, distances the subject. There is no singular moment of revelation. Once one has overcome the surprise of precisionist illusion, the familiar becomes unfamiliar, and figure and object combine, so that one becomes almost symbolic of the other. "I have to find a metaphor," says the artist, and

refers to Kafka. The man from Prague, he says, made the old parables plausible by describing them in a fresh way and interpreting them based on his own personal and public vision.

"This is the way an artist thinks." The process of Kanovitz' pictorial thinking is exemplified by his personal, contemporary version of the age-old Icarus theme, done in 1974 and inspired first by W.H. Auden's poem on Brueghel's rendering of "Icarus' Fall," and, as it happens, a reproduction of the painting. In Brueghel's work the drowning is an incidental anecdote, while all around life goes on as usual: the plowing farmer doesn't even turn. In Kanovitz' painting one looks from the back seat of a car just behind the windshield. Only the hands of the driver (Kanovitz) on the steering wheel are visible, along with a part of his face in the rearview mirror. Seen through the windshield are the Queensboro Bridge in New York, a tiny airplane in the sky, and a man on the embankment with his dog continuing on his way, unaware of the plane that sooner or later will crash. Kanovitz has translated Auden's thoughts into the language of the painted image. Much that doesn't alter the flow of life goes unnoticed, both past and present. The everyday life of the urbanite turns to legend and becomes, as writer William Berkson of once said, a fragment of a public mythology." The painting "Icarus" is exemplary of iconography that is typical of Kanovitz: the permeability of internal and external as symbolized by the windshield, the interweaving of public and private, and of everyday life and legend. Seeing what one sees is, to paraphrase Le Corbusier, the mark of this style. This means also recognizing what in the first viewing may be hidden, but which emerges to make the passing moment permanent and gives perspective to commonplace experience. This has always been the case with Kanovitz. As a student and assistant to the painter Franz Kline (1910-1962), he was still coming to terms with Action Painting. Applying paint in thick strokes rather than emphasizing detail, he had already begun to avoid narrative or simply dramatic effects, just as in the more mature paintings of his realistic period. As to theme, "Four A.M. Eastern Standard Time" (1956) is a transitional work. Expressively depicted is a jam session of the Earl Kay Quartet, to which Kanovitz used to belong as a jazz trombonist. He stands on the left with his instrument, apart from his friends. The theme of isolation--of loneliness while being with others--that is so often seen in later works, is here already made manifest. During a

stay in Europe from 1956 to 1958 the break with his earlier aesthetic ideals was already in the making. Responding to the artistic refinement and cool precision of 15th century, Florentine painting, as well as its balance between figurative representation and abstract principles of composition, he realized that he would have to take a new path which would lead him in a direction away from Franz Kline and Abstract Expressionism. "I rediscovered painting," he says, "and knew what I had to do." Namely, he developed a figurative style built on his Italian experience. His paintings were to be cool, not hot, in order to emphasize thought more than spontaneity. They were to maintain a distance from the subject, an economy of means, and a control of the emotions. Upon his return from Europe with its subsequent "culture shock," Kanovitz studied Art History (with, among others, Irwin Panofsky) and took a sabbatical from painting. When he resumed his work it was abstract, but with a hint of figuration. These still-life-like architectural compositions reveal the artist's admiration for Matisse's simplification of and concentration on the essentials, combined with as Kanovitz puts it, "the generosity of his aesthetics."

This foretells the prevailing attitude in the realistic paintings "Hermaphrodite" (1963) and "Nude Greek Reclining (1965 which quotes Manet's "Olympia") to the recent series of window paintings. In the last five years he has begun to create works which contrast layers of paintings within paintings. Kanovitz' work is never intellectually overbearing although the artistic refinement is highly complex. Figures and objects, though they are abundant in associations, are not agitated but seen at rest, and thereby become the artist's pictorial signs. His goal however, is not complexity. He still has an abstract view of things. Only in this way, he says, can he avoid total identification with the images in his paintings, which spring from personal experience, always provided by outside stimuli. It was an event unrelated to painting that was instrumental in turning Kanovitz into a Photorealist. After his father's death in 1963 he was leafing through old family albums. There he recognized reproductions of the ordinary, coincidental, and banal, to be "abstraction from reality.." as Jorn Merkert, curator of the exhibition, described it. It is unimportant whether Kanovitz was first inspired by newspaper clippings or photographs. Later he perfected photographic skills and began to use a slide projector as an additional tool. Never is he aiming only for the most perfect

reproduction of a reproduction. The photo is not the subject but the starting point of the composition, just as any sketch would be. Unlike the Swiss artist Franz Gertsch (ART 5/1987), Kanovitz does not project slides directly onto the canvas in order to fill them with paint and monumentalize them. Instead, Kanovitz interjects the drawing as a intermediary, so that it governs the composition. Thus photography becomes an instrument for painting. This is the spirit of his work process. This does not deny the aesthetic dimension of photography, its tonal modulations being one of its important refinements. Kanovitz' use of the air brush translates this soft and fluid shading. The camera is limited, however, in its capacity to shape reality while Kanovitz' ambitious goal is to provoke the viewer with the contrast between "hyper" realistic detail and abstract composition. His paintings of the seventies easily demonstrate how this dialectic works: "Hotel Quai Voltaire" (1974), with its clear, segmented composition, its use of color, and even the treatment of the quilt ornaments, shows the artist's admiration for the Fauve Matisse.

"Journal" (1972-73), inspired by Pop Art's blow-up technique, illustrates the contrast between a realistic foreground and a free-floating background. This painting clarifies Kanovitz' interest in interpreting the real. Seemingly small alterations invoke distance and give a new concreteness to the work. The eyes of the diva (Mia Farrow) mirror a reality outside the painting and the evanescence of the acrylic paint moves the portrait into the realm of the unreal. The artistic theme that Kanovitz continues to develop in this period is not that of how to turn banality into something beautiful, but of how to weave together illusion and reality. This alludes strongly to the conceptual component of his work.

In "The Painting Wall and Water Bucket Stool" (1958), the stool is casting a shadow of steel. Following such ironic insights were "cut-outs" painted on canvas and mounted on wood. They were free-standing silhouetted paintings without background. "The idea was to excite the viewer's imagination," says the artist. This is defined again in "Chair and Shadow" (1987), when he gives both objects the same material presence. The surprising effect of trompe-l'oeil works that followed the cut-outs and attracted attention at Documenta 5 soon ceased to satisfy Kanovitz. He continues to use these

concepts on a new and advanced level. For example, he contrasts a ship in a moonlit bay with a perfectly executed upside-down bedpost casting a shadow ("Toward the Bay " 1986), and combines painting and object through the appearance of a romantic landscape inside the solid architectural wood frame of a door ("Full Moon Door," 1984). Even more important in his works of the eighties is his use of interconnected transparent layers reminiscent of the disparate images in the work of the Belgian surrealist, Rene Magritte. For example, an open grand piano and a chair are placed in front of an illusion, perhaps the shadow of a windowed wall, both standing in water ("The Grand Piano," 1987). In Kanovitz' "Terrasse at Barnes Landing," Claude Monet's famous "Terasse at Sainte-Adresse" rests on an easel before a narrow coastal landscape, the hills of which permeate the clouds and sky above, the easel, and the painting within the painting.

The many paintings within paintings correspond to unending variations on reality and perception in that nothing is as it first seems. Reality is not on the surface. In the mingling of past and present, day and dream, the memory is as real as the moment of experience. These paintings show Kanovitz at the zenith of his artistic brilliance. He does not allow them to become ends in themselves in definable categories. The mythology of the ordinary has begun its poetic phase without severing its connection with reality. As Guiseppe Verdi, the great realist among the composers of the 19th century said: "Reproducing reality may be good, but inventing reality is better, much better." Kanovitz does both, and it is this that gives substance and perspective to his work.