

## *The Impulse to Autobiography in the Work of Howard Kanovitz*

by Michael Florescu

A century ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson predicted that the art of fiction would be superseded eventually by the practice of autobiography "if only," he cautioned, "if only a man knew how to choose among what he calls his experiences that which is really his experience, and how to record truth truly." If only a man knew how to choose the phrase dives off the page with almost fatalistic desperation. If only a man knew. The implication is that even though a man struggle with uncertainty and doubt, search tirelessly within himself for a firm handhold, and persist in evaluating his efforts, constant attention must be paid if he is to separate successfully the authentic from the fraudulent, the committed from the objective, the pure and simple from the merely simplistic. That has always been the challenge of autobiography. Yet despite the difficulty, it is no wonder that in these dangerous days, when experiences are validated statistically rather than for the intensity of their meaning for the individual, the painter, along with the writer and the more popular interpretive artists, feels an urgent need for self-exposure, to offer up the net sum of his memories and projections -rather than be judged for his ingenuity and skill in performing with light and space, the formal exercises of illusionism.

Of course a tendency toward the autobiographical in American art is by no means new, but in the late 'seventies what had formerly been a tendency achieved the scale of a movement. In part reacting against the doctrinaire compartmentalism of the 'fifties and 'sixties, artists from allover the United States have been "doing their own thing," that is, employing the materia prima of their own day-to-day lives to express their responses to the world at large. In considering this impulse in the work of Howard Kanovitz, where it is manifested in a quite special way, it will be helpful to follow it back to its immediate origins in the first post-War generation of American Originals, the Abstract Expressionists, each one of whom was seeking, in the words of the late Harold Rosenberg, "a unique idiom in which to unveil a being underlying consciousness."

Along into the mid-'fifties, Kanovitz's response to the exigent mysteries of personal identity, "a being underlying consciousness," was couched in the still dominant Abstract Expressionist mode. But then, quite abruptly Kanovitz underwent a traumatic

experience: The death of his father brought him face to face with the irreducible fact of corporeality. Overnight, Kanovitz discovered that his accustomed professional practice of spontaneous self-examination was yielding up a new, and for him original element. This new element was figuration. His first truly significant work, the one in which the figures can be seen emerging from the medium of the paint itself is "Four A.M. Eastern Standard Time." The significance of this work can, however, scarcely be perceived in isolation; it will be necessary to consider it as the first in a sequence of four works which span the years 1955 through 1979. Before he produced the second in this extraordinarily revealing sequence, Kanovitz waited ten years, and then in 1966 he painted what was to be a seminal work in the Photo-Realist canon, "New Yorkers 2;" "Icarus," the most complex of the four was done in 1975; and then, to represent the consummation of this quite individual mode of inquiry, the large pastel "The End of All That."

Lest that appear a wholly arbitrary selection, let me explain, at the outset, that I expect an examination of those four examples to reveal, stage by stage, the evolution of Kanovitz's attitudes to autobiography, and of the means by which he has made contact with "a being underlying consciousness." Now sooner or later we are going to be faced with the issue of validity; specifically, to what extent can the identity of the artist be comprehended by an examination of his visual expression alone, without reference to his life? Certainly this is one of the basic questions raised by Kanovitz's evolution as a figurative artist, and I believe that the answer to it will become gradually apparent as we look closely at the specific works. The very first thing that strikes us, then, is the image of the artist himself, and the differing ways in which Kanovitz represents himself. As for an underlying principle, we can only say that it concerns the placement of the artist within the composition, that is, the location of his point of view, the location from which he makes contact with others, the location from which he may best launch himself off into the world at large. The fact is, in the genre of the biographical, personal identity has always depended, to a large degree, upon a sense of place: In common with the literary artist, the painter has traditionally relied upon landscape to suggest the soil from which his subject has received his formative sustenance, the setting which most accurately represents his field of activity, the climate which most sensitively symbolizes his emotional precipitation. What is significant about Kanovitz's figures, though, is that they take their places in a dramatic void. The biographical figures or objects have been

wrenched from a landscape natural or appropriate to them (whether that landscape derives from a "found" photographic source or from the artist's "stage-managed" arrangement of forms in the studio) so that they are located nowhere, they "belong" nowhere -except within the painted surface. Kanovitz's images are perfectly self-involved, yet there is no sense of them ever having been in control. The reason for this, assuredly, is that although recognizably engaged in humanity, they do not really "belong." Like a dreamer's surrogates, they enact roles. They are perpetual immigrants, strangers in a strange land, poised between two realities.

Before passing on to the four paintings mentioned above, I would like to draw attention to a passage written by Professor Meyer Schapiro on the subject of the still life, a passage that strikes me as being perfectly relevant to the figurative work of Howard Kanovitz: "Without a fixed place in nature and submitted to arbitrary and often accidental manipulation, the still life on the table is an objective example of the formed but constantly rearranged, the freely disposable in reality and therefore connate with an idea of artistic liberty. The still life picture to a greater degree than the landscape or historical painting, owes its composition to the painter, yet more than these seems to represent a piece of everyday reality." In quoting Schapiro there, what I mean to suggest is that Kanovitz's intention will best be comprehended if his work is considered in the genre of the still life. The tension in such a situation is inherent, deriving from the juxtaposition between autobiography and art. And it is precisely this quality of juxtaposition and the division between that provoked Adorno's stricture: "The division which makes everything into an object must, instead of guiding thought, become an object of thought." It is, I suggest, in the "constantly re-arranged, the freely disposable" composition of his work that Kanovitz pursues his search for individual identity. "In the dark night of the soul," wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald, "it is always four o'clock in the morning," and in Kanovitz's 1956 oil "Four A.M. Eastern Standard Time," the depiction of a jam session, one is instantly struck by the musicians' isolation. They are "jamming" together, but it is in their isolation that they achieve unity. In his response to this work, the poet Frank O'Hara wrote memorably of "the red of ambition, the blue of despair;" more relevant to our present inquiry, however, is the appearance in the composition of the artist himself. Kanovitz is the trombone player in the left foreground. Note not only his self-absorption and his absorption in his horn, but also his location on the outer edge

of the group. The painting was done at a time in his life when Kanovitz was becoming obliged to re-think his priorities: a full day spent in the studio, painting, followed by an evening at the legendary Cedar Bar, and playing jazz through the night and early morning -had started to exact a price in physical and psychic exhaustion. And so, in a manner comparable to that with which he soon came to arrange and re-arrange, to freely dispose the several discrete constituents of his paintings, Kanovitz rearranged the various elements of his life. In so doing, in assigning to painting the major part of his energy and attention, he was following, albeit unconsciously, the implied stricture of Theodor Adorno; which was to make of the distinction separating experience into subjective and objective, a focus for the artist's most attentive concern. By locating himself on the edge of the group, Kanovitz was acknowledging his past as a member of the group, while keeping his options open in respect of an uncertain and possibly isolated future. This painting's title too has both appositeness and irony: 4 A.M. Eastern Standard Time locates the artist himself quite precisely in both time and place. The phrase is also an elaborate double entendre: it refers not only to the specific time zone, but also to the fact that the scene depicted is a standard (that is, an unexceptional) occurrence at 4 A.M. on the East Side of Manhattan, where the painter lived at that time, and played jazz. Yet the use of the double entendre is more than a mere play on words, it is a reiteration of the painter's place in the social pattern at that period, a result of his need for identification in terms of his role. The title also has, incidentally, the irrefutable resonance of an airline schedule: Estimated Time of Take-Off.

In "New Yorkers 2," Kanovitz again depicts himself in a relationship to a group, but in contrast to "Four A.M. Eastern Standard Time," the spectator receives the impression that although the artist (the grey-suited figure to the right of the window, cigarette in hand) is not directly involved with the order of business evidently under discussion in the scene -he is nonetheless secure in his position. His facial expression is tentative, to be sure, but it is a tentativeness that owes nothing to the positions taken up by the other members of the group; rather it is an indication of the role the artist has assigned himself in the frozen drama he has chosen to depict. And adding to this sense of the temporal is Kanovitz's use of a red backdrop. Use of the word backdrop is deliberate: At no time are we led to believe that these New Yorkers are meeting in a real

urban landscape -despite the realistic view beyond the window: Only in a transforming dream do the emotions of the protagonists transcend palpability: Only in a transforming dream do the figures cast no shadows. And even as we look at this work and find our eyes returning always and irresistibly toward the seated figure of the artist himself, we find ourselves not merely looking, but actively watching, as the artist appears to recede, powered by invisible stage machinery back into Frank O'Hara's "Red of ambition." Nine years separate "New Yorkers 2" from "Icarus" of 1975, and what a remarkable development has taken place in that comparatively short time! From a concern with what may be termed media scenes and themes -popular mythology originating in photojournalism, Kanovitz's work after 1968 commenced to express a meditation on the division between the private and the public. A rather straightforward but extremely forceful example of this interim period would be "Mazola and Ronzoni" of 1969, a trompe l'oeil treatment of four full-to-overflowing garbage cans around which are piled cardboard cartons which formerly contained Mazola (a brand of salad and cooking oil) and Ronzoni (a popular brand of spaghetti). Ostensibly, the subject matter is straight out of the Pop Art Reference Library. What is significant is the way Kanovitz treats it, a way wholly consistent with his personal world-view. Where Warhol, for instance, by his relentless quantification of soup cans or celebrities denies meaning to individual experience by substituting the principle of equivalence for that of uniqueness, Kanovitz's Ronzoni carton and the overflowing garbage bin affirms uniqueness by granting to the disposable the quality of self-consciousness. With the 1975 "Icarus," Kanovitz has come a long, long way. The tentativeness with which he portrayed himself in "New Yorkers 2" has completely gone. That part of himself he shows us, his hands, epitomize -both physically and metaphorically, that he is in control, and it is not without significance that he is at the wheel of his car. Meantime, let us turn to the ostensible subject of the painting, which was evidently inspired less by the ancient Greek tale of the mythological test-pilot who flew too close to the sun and perished from its heat, than by Brueghel's rendering of that tale (in the Musee des Beaux Arts, Brussels). The poet W.H. Auden wrote of this work with insights perfectly applicable to the Kanovitz version, save in one particular:

"About suffering they were never wrong,

The Old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position; how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just  
walking dully along;  
In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure . . ."

The one particular in which Kanovitz's version differs is, of course, that the airplane, which represents Icarus, has not yet crashed; it will, though, sooner or later, and we know it, and Kanovitz knows it too. The man and his dog, out for a walk beneath the Queensboro Bridge in Manhattan, they do not know it, and when it eventually does crash, they will, like Brueghel's ploughman, ignore its importance. Kanovitz, however, whose artist's hands are on the wheel, will, having prepared himself to record the incident, regard it as "an important failure." That is his role, the artist's role. To find in what for the ploughman or the walker with the dog are scarcely aware of, let alone think worth telling about, something worth celebrating as important, though admittedly a failure - may not bring him joy or the approval of his fellow human beings, but it is what he must do, and he must do it because he is the only person who is, quite literally, in a position to do it. Here, it is worth a backward glance to "Four A.M. Eastern Standard Time" in which the artist placed himself on the canvas in a position to be a participant in an event, but in no position to direct its course: to "New Yorkers 2," where the artist was in a position only to make tentative suggestions to the assembled company, all of whom were obviously men with some clout. With "Icarus," Kanovitz has taken hold of his identity with the discovery of his role, and we have been given the opportunity to follow his route. But what then are we to make of the fourth work in this arbitrary sequence, "The End of All That?" At the outset, I cannot believe that an artist who is as careful as Kanovitz is about giving titles to his works, did not intend the spectator to take note of that self-consciously resonant phrase, and to keep it in mind as he examined the picture. I think we can infer that here Kanovitz is telling us that he has spent a good deal of time wrestling with the problem of visible differences - the un-chewed piece of toast, the full

ashtray, the empty goblet, the eyeglasses removed, on the evidence, to rest the artist's eyes . . . every one of those details tells us as much, and the overlaid projection of a magazine advertisement, which has been previously "doctored" for the purpose of transforming it into art reiterates the meaning of the phrase while simultaneously calling it into question.

Why should this be so? Why should it be that we view with irony an image that is asserted by a self-appointed authority to find its echo in literal meaning exclusively? The answer is quite simple: Because all along our eyes have been telling us that there were and are discrepancies, that there were and are visible differences between an image and the name given an image, between Emerson's "what he calls his experiences" and "that which is really his experience." And it is in the division between the two, it is precisely in the discrepancy that art is accomplished. Only by locating himself in a position where an overview is possible can the artist identify himself as such.

And so, with "The End of All That," Kanovitz has summed up the process of his own evolution to this point. The title I would suggest, should be understood as reverse irony. The end which Kanovitz is asserting is not the end of visible differences, but the end of his inquiry into them in order to discover his identity. That he has discovered it he has made perfectly visible.