

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

The Return of the Academy

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

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June 2017

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My community of friends, family, and academic mentors has helped me develop what was once a budding idea into a finished thesis project. To begin, I would like to thank my professors in UCR's Art History department. I feel fortunate to have worked with such generous and kind mentors for the past two years. Dr. Jason Weems developed my awareness of historiography and always encouraged me to ask big questions through a specific lens. Dr. Liz Kotz helped me probe into the deeper questions of my thesis, and she supported my quest to explore a topic outside of the typical purview of art history. Dr. JP Park played an instrumental role in the early stages of the formulation of the thesis and never failed to offer a new book to add to my research list. Dr. Johannes Endres helped me improve the overall historical context for the project. Dr. Jeanette Kohl provided me with excellent feedback and recommendations for reading materials. Finally, Dr. Susan Laxton took up the role as my primary advisor at a critical time during this project and offered an incredible amount of support. Susan elevated the rigor and criticality of the entire project. Susan never ceases to amaze me with the amount of generosity she offers as a mentor and I cannot thank her enough for her help.

I would also like to thank my friends and family for the support they gave me during this process. I have my mom to thank for supporting me as a scholar and an artist from the very beginning. She made countless sacrifices to help me follow my dreams. My sister Kirsten always encouraged me to follow my passions and academic interests. She has been an astounding role model for me as I navigate academia. Her confidence in my ability to tackle new challenges has helped me get through many difficult times. To my

friends who have been there for me all along a difficult and winding path I also thank you. It is humbling to remember all the help I have received along the way and I hope this paper offers valuable insights in return to some of my fellow artists and art historians.

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Return of the Academy

by

Robin Hilary Hextrum

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Art History  
University of California, Riverside, June 2017  
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Since the 1970s a movement called classical realism has grown across North America and Europe. Classical realist painters reject modern and contemporary art in favor of traditional academic painterly practices. This thesis investigates the origins and implications of the presence of this movement within the context of art education. This paper considers the role of pastiche in the philosophy of the classical realist movement, the similarities and differences between the 21<sup>st</sup> century classical realist atelier and academies of the past, and the ways in which the atelier offers a simplified alternative model of education in the face of contradictory art educational models. Citing work by Howard Singerman, James Elkins, and Nicholas Houghton, this thesis builds on commentary about the role of education in shaping the artist and the art world. In this case, classical realism provides a window into larger issues at stake in both art education and the contemporary art world.

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## Introduction

Once the highest form of art practice in the west, academic painting now occupies a denigrated position in the hierarchy of the arts. Intellectuals and connoisseurs affiliated with the elite levels of the art world continue to look down on academic paintings with disdain. University art programs tend to shy away from offering courses with traditional skill based foundations as the perceived necessity of developing technique for its own sake has all but vanished. Today, few museums would consider adding works by contemporary classical painters to their permanent collections. The very notion of a “contemporary classical oil painter” sounds paradoxical or even preposterous. Given the current state of affairs, one may be tempted to conclude that there are few contemporary artists and intellectuals who support the continued practice of classical oil painting.

However, one would be mistaken to jump to this conclusion. An active community of contemporary artists and intellectuals strive to maintain the traditions of the past from 19<sup>th</sup> century academies in the face of a 21<sup>st</sup> century art world. Artists seeking traditional skill based training can now attend any number of atelier programs across the globe where they will find a full curriculum of classical training including life drawing, portrait painting and cast drawing. Contemporary academic painters have even developed their own journals, publications, websites and conferences. And, for the past two years, these outsider artists have gathered together to share their concerns at a special conference located in Ventura titled *The Representational Art Conference*. This collection of artists, art teachers, and even sympathetic critics and art historians comprises an international movement often referred to as “classical realism.”

As one may expect, the intellectual gymnastics necessary to uphold the philosophy behind this movement require a healthy dose of historical amnesia. By examining the educational models this movement supports, this paper will explore the role of pastiche utilized by classical realists and how it aids their conservative project by simplifying complex artistic concepts and side stepping critical intellectual investigations that may undermine the claims of classical realism. In his essay “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Frederick Jameson defines pastiche as a form of empty parody. According to Jameson, pastiche consists of the “the imitation of a peculiar or unique style” and even “the wearing of a stylistic mask.”<sup>1</sup> Jameson distinguishes the imitation utilized in pastiche from parody because pastiche does not contain a critical angle. Jameson claims pastiche “a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic.”<sup>2</sup> The work classical realists make is not satirical or ironic. Classical realist work sincerely deploys traditional artistic techniques and strategies. While the classical realist movement rejects post-modernism and conceptualism, many classical realists engage in pastiche by sampling from different historical periods. The movement collapses fundamentally distinct art movements including neo-classicism, 19<sup>th</sup> century realism, impressionism and even surrealism. Classical realists uphold a convenient blindspot that prevents them from acknowledging the deployment of academic painting in the service of totalitarian regimes, the consistent degradation and objectification of the female body

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, (New York: Norton &

<sup>2</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, 131.

rooted in conventions of the nude, and the sordid legacy of representational arts in the purposes of colonizing the globe through the depiction of indigenous peoples as less than human. Classical realists need pastiche as an empty form of stylistic mimicry because any degree of self-inquiry or criticism would dismantle their project. They cannot begin to define the differences between the historical aims or context of classicism, idealism, realism or impressionism since this would result in undermining their universalizing definition of masterful painting.

This movement stands outside the purview of art criticism, and as result is not held accountable to historical reality. Classical realists react against the increasing conceptual concerns and priorities of the larger art world and art educational institutions. They also reject the intellectual underpinnings of complex intersectional dialogues about gender, race and class in both the art education system and the larger university system. Leaders in the movement sandwich together ideas without nuanced consideration of history and blunder forward with raw anti-intellectual and anti-leftist passions. A nuanced examination of this movement will serve to hold classical realists accountable in how they view history and place judgment on modes of art making. By not taking them seriously and ignoring the sheer scale of this movement, art historians and critics permit classical realists to continue operating in a conservative vacuum.

But this movement is not simply important to examine for the purposes of criticizing rampant anti-intellectualism or conservatism in the arts. Examining this anachronistic and anti-intellectual movement provides valuable insights into the trends of the larger art world. Classical realists reflect a mirror onto the aims, concerns and

priorities of the larger art world and art educational institutions. It is no coincidence that the resurgence of classical realism sprang forth in a post-modern environment where individuals could feel freer to question the grand narratives of modernist manifestos and in particular Greenberg's strict arguments against illusionism in painting. Canonical texts including *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (1984), *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985) by Rosalind E. Krauss, Arthur Danto's *After the End of Art* (1997), and Hans Belting's *Art History After Modernism* (2003), precede a lesser known text by Donald Kuspit titled *The End of Art* (2004) that supports the revival of contemporary representational painting. This movement reflects a broader reconsideration of representational painting in the context of a post-modern and post-historical art world where modernist myths that once stamped out the legitimacy of representation no longer hold the same weight.

It is also necessary to come to terms with the recent development of classical realism because we operate in a time when 19<sup>th</sup> century academic art does not receive complicated and informed analysis. In spite of attempts to develop broad awareness, art historians still let biases towards academic art obstruct key critical analysis and historical observations. Textbooks continue to tell a narrative of the noble avant-garde as the winners of art history rather than considering the broader populist visions that guided particular historical contexts or even arguments by scholars like Rosalind Krauss that undermine the notion of originality in the avant-garde. By pointing out the contradictions inherent to classical realism and larger contradictions in art education, this essay will offer fruitful forms of intellectual discomfort to problematize paradigms holding sway

over both classical realists and the contemporary art world. After working through this discomfort, the paper will offer modes of thinking that can build bridges between currently polarized opinions.

### **My Background as an Author**

I am an Assistant Professor of Visual Art at Regis University, and I spent a number of years as an artist and art educator in Southern California. I studied at USC from 2005 to 2009 and during this time I grappled with all the advantages and disadvantages that a University Arts education has to offer. Following four years of higher education in the arts, I learned to think and talk like an artist, but I recognized that I lacked a foundational skill set in painting. To remedy this, I completed an MFA in painting at one of the few “Art Renewal Center Approved” graduate programs in the country: Laguna College of Art and Design. During my three years in the program, I learned about another art world. This art world consists of a vast array of contemporary figurative painters who each have a respect for a particular kind of craft and technique. Unlike many MFA students, I studied in a program that celebrated the act of painting and encouraged a model of education that remains both mimetic and representational. Though it does not promote a strict classical realist aesthetic, LCAD encourages students to study at an atelier called The Florence Academy and to apply for awards through *The Art Renewal Center*. As an institution, LCAD straddles the line between classical realism and more forward thinking contemporary representational painting. As much as I felt at home technically at LCAD, I began to question the prevalence of traditional female nudes and

the casual sexism that seemed to sit so comfortably within certain segments of classical realism.

Recognizing that LCAD needed curriculum dealing with gender, race and aesthetics, I proposed and taught liberal arts curriculum at Laguna College of Art and Design that called into question the assumptions of traditional academic aesthetics. I also wrote and presented a paper on this very topic at *The Representational Art Conference* in 2013. While I was there, I came to understand the broader implications of the classical realist movement. Though there is still much work to be done to analyze the outdated approaches to gender and race in this movement, I recognized that the classical realist tendencies towards sexually objectifying and racially stereotyped paintings sprang up from a broader tendency to neglect the contributions of 20<sup>th</sup> century dialogues and a consistent need to suppress intellectual inquiry. The sexism and racism I saw was a symptom of anti-intellectualism and anti-conceptualism.

After further research into the topic, I settled on examining the model of education that exemplifies classical realist philosophy. The educational institutions classical realists construct, often referred to as ateliers, represent the foundations of their anti-intellectual philosophies. And, because these institutions encourage the development of skill, a huge manifestation of the movement itself takes the form of educational institutions where students can learn traditional oil painting techniques rarely taught in other art institutions. Because this movement is all about reviving skill, the heart of the movement lies in the teaching of skill-based techniques in atelier programs. The key to understanding this movement lies in coming to terms with the rapid development of

atelier programs across the globe that construct and produce classical realist painters. Like Howard Singerman, author of *Art Subjects*, I believe studying the role of art education in developing and constructing artists is a necessary, valuable and important project. Singerman explained his own project by writing, “The basic assumption of this project is that where and how artists are educated now—and, indeed, where art and its criticism take their places now—makes a difference.”<sup>3</sup> Singerman looked at artists in universities to understand the way we produce artists as a nation. This paper will consider research by authors including Howard Singerman, James Elkins, and Nicholas Houghton who have all contributed to research about art education. However, it will focus on atelier programs, which in many ways embody the antithesis of the educational institutions the aforementioned authors examine.

I write about this topic as an artist who sees the benefits and limitations of both parties from first hand experience in a University art school and in an ARC approved institution. Part of what drew me to completing a second graduate degree at UC Riverside was a need to understand my own experiences as an art student, artist and an art educator. Like many art students, I found the art education system confusing, contradictory and difficult to navigate. I often confronted conflicting advice from professors, and found no clear consensus on what I should learn while attempting to develop as an artist. Technique was both important and irrelevant. Concept was both necessary and unnecessary. Student work was naïve by default rather than direct intention. Anything was fair game, but some projects, like a beautiful landscape painting, were always

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 5.



already off the table. I am sympathetic to the importance of craft, skill, technique, and the project of painting. Yet I see the value in modern and contemporary art, and an educational model that incorporates theoretical and conceptual curriculum. I find it disconcerting that any higher education art institutions would neglect instruction of cultural and social context alongside of art production. Throughout my years making paintings, I have made many inadequate artworks in the name of a conceptual agenda and equally as many awful paintings that fixate primarily on painterly skill. The art I am most proud of balances concept and craft. In that respect, I offer my perspective on this subject as an artist and educator who is both an insider and an outsider to this movement. My hope is that I can offer a moderate perspective on highly polarizing issues.

### **Organization of Chapters and Information**

The first chapter of this thesis will describe *The Art Renewal Center* and the philosophical position of its chairman Frederick C. Ross. This chapter will set out to explain the concerns, aims, and goals of classical realist movement by examining a speech Frederick C. Ross delivered at *The Representational Art Conference* in 2015. It will argue that the philosophy of this movement unintentionally arrives at post-modern strategies and that in particular, Ross encourages a form of pastiche where emulated styles are removed from their historical or ideological context in the service of an anti-intellectual agenda. This chapter will introduce the concept of atelier training and education that *The Art Renewal Center* supports at both the K-12 and post-secondary

levels. Part of the aim of this chapter is to establish the scale of this movement and to explain what is at stake in ignoring such a sprawling classical epidemic.

Understanding the lack of historical awareness at the heart of the movement informs the second chapter of this paper, which explores the departures contemporary ateliers make from traditional academies. After establishing the way in which the philosophy of this movement utilizes pastiche in the service of its anti-intellectual aims, the next chapter focuses on the anti-intellectual nature of contemporary atelier programs. This chapter will consider how atelier programs are both similar to and different from traditional academic models of art education and as a result how they further support the pastiche of the classical realist movement on a broader scale. It will ultimately claim that these ateliers are not the contemporary equivalent of traditional academies due to their anti-intellectual approach to art making. This chapter will also argue that contemporary ateliers further depart from the traditional academy since their status is so low in comparison to their academic predecessors. By examining why contemporary ateliers have such a low status, this chapter hopes to further shed light on issues of status and taste in contemporary art education. This sprawling populist art movement reflects a potential crisis inherent to the exclusive nature of the contemporary art world.<sup>4</sup>

The third and final chapter will explore why the atelier education is so appealing to art students today. The anti-intellectual ateliers promote a simple and digestible model of art education. However misplaced and misguided these ateliers may be, one cannot

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<sup>4</sup> Here it is tempting to draw parallels between the classical realist movement and the recent shock of the presidential election of Donald Trump. It begs the question, what assumptions do privileged art centers make about aesthetic awareness that are grossly out of touch with the larger population?

deny that they provide an environment that is easier to navigate than contemporary post-secondary art schools. In an ironic turn of events, the very emphasis on productive uncertainty and general resistance to conventions in contemporary art education pushes students to look at the alternative model of education housed within the ateliers. The ateliers offer a respite from the now standardized avant-garde model, which dominates the curriculum at larger art institutions. Using Nicholas Houghton's description of six contradictory models present in contemporary art education, this chapter explains how ateliers operate as a reaction to the tensions in the contemporary postsecondary art-programs. By this, I refer to both University art programs and major art schools like Art Institute, RISD, Cooper Union, Pratt, and CalArts. This chapter will point to contradictions in both the curriculum and admissions process of contemporary art programs in order to explain why some students may opt for an atelier education. Considering the goals of classical realists in relation to contemporary art institutions can shed a valuable light onto potential improvements or reconsiderations of educational models.

This thesis can by no means capture the vast array of concerns and issues that arise through the analysis of the classical realist movement. The fundamental aspirations of this movement are to undermine the core values and structures of the contemporary art world. A thorough analysis of this movement entails questioning key concepts surrounding the definition of art, how we place value on art, the role of representation in art, the value or lack of value placed on certain kinds of art production, the role of museums and galleries in reproducing particular aesthetic values, the definition of beauty,

the role of aesthetics in determining value, the issue of craft, the prevalence of de-skilling in art education, issues of status, and the nature of the avant-garde. There are infinitely many issues that connect to this topic. By examining the classical realist movement through the lens of art education, this thesis hopes to develop a small brick to place within the daunting wall of issues related to this movement.

## Chapter I. The Role of Pastiche in the Philosophy of Classical Realism

To any trained art historian the term presents a problem. What is “*classical realism*”? How can someone combine these terms out of context in such an arbitrary way? Richard F. Lack was the first person to use the term “classical realism” to describe this phenomenon of contemporary academic painting. Lack’s own training reflects a combination of contradictory art approaches that help to explain his loose idea of artistic categories. Lack studied with Boston impressionist R.H. Gammel and William McGregor Paxton. Paxton studied with the renowned 19<sup>th</sup> century French academic painter Jean-Léon Gérôme. So Lack owes his training both to the legacy of the French academy and to the impressionist movement that rebelled against that academy. In 1969 Lack founded a school named *Atelier Lack* that fused Boston Impressionism and 19<sup>th</sup> century French Atelier training. He developed the name classical realism in the 1980s to describe his method of teaching. He received criticism for the inherent contradiction in his terminology, but he stood by this term because he believed it appropriately described an art movement rooted in direct observational painting, while still celebrating principles of beauty, and order.<sup>5</sup> Lack founded this movement on historically unresolvable contradictions between impressionism and academic idealism. The term realism in this model seems to stand in casually for impressionist practices of working from life. Furthermore, the movement ignores any distinction between ateliers and academies and often uses the two terms interchangeably. The goal of the classical realist movement is to

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<sup>5</sup> Allison Malafronte, “Daniel Graves: A Portrait of the Florence Academy of Art’s Founder”, in *The Florence Academy of Art: The First 25 Years 1991-2016*, (Florence: Florence Academy, 2015), 8.

revive a contradictory combination of various historical art movements and in doing so it generates a pastiche of both methods and styles.

### **Definitions of Pastiche According to Frederic Jameson, Ingeborg Hoesterey and Richard Dyer**

In a general sense, pastiche refers to the process of copying or combining artistic styles. Within the context of postmodern vocabulary, pastiche describes the process of lifting and copying unique styles without a form of satire or critique. Fredric Jameson's essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" is among the most famous considerations of the phenomenon of pastiche. Jameson argues that unlike parody, pastiche offers no intent to mock a previous style. Jameson observes that pastiche is a form of "blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor."<sup>6</sup> A key point in Jameson's analysis of pastiche is the notion that there is no "normal" that artists are working against when they use pastiche.

Yet pastiche itself is not a term Jameson invented, and it does not necessarily contain negative connotations. First used in 1677, the term pastiche has a moving definition and is not altogether positive or negative.<sup>7</sup> In his text *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, and Literature* (2001), Ingeborg Hoesterey traces pastiche to the Italian word '*pasticcio*' which, "denoted in early modern Italian a pâté of various ingredients—a hodgepodge of meat, vegetables, eggs and a variety of other possible

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<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 131.

<sup>7</sup> Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, and Literature*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 5

additions.”<sup>8</sup> Both Ingeborg Hoesterey and Richard Dyer acknowledge that there is a long a rich visual tradition of pastiche in visual art, music, theatre and literature. Richard Dyer, in his book *Pastiche* (2007), also considers the vast potential of applications of pastiche and analyzes examples of it that date as far back as the play within a play in Hamlet.<sup>9</sup> This consideration of pastiche frames it as productive strategy for building upon previous art movements and making internal references within a single work.

Hoesterey notes that the term pastiche gained its negative connotation when it was applied to painters who imitated the styles of Renaissance masters with devious or fraudulent intentions. Their imitative work combined various styles with the goal of deceiving patrons and viewers into thinking the value of the work was higher than it truly was.<sup>10</sup> Hoesterey explains the deployment of pastiche in response to a growing demand for original Renaissance oil paintings: “These artists would skillfully combine elements from several originals into a product of their own making, approximating a sort of generic High Renaissance style that was then sold to buyers as authentic, or as the work of an authentic master.”<sup>11</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> century classical realists engage in their own version of pastiche, hoping that they can imbue their paintings with an appeal to the public by embodying Renaissance and academic ideals. Though their work may impress a broader public with impressive demonstrations of technique skill, the paintings of classical realists go largely ignored by the upper echelons of the art world. This legacy of negative

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<sup>8</sup> Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, and Literature*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Dyer, *Pastiche*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 64.

<sup>10</sup> Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, and Literature*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, and Literature*, 2.

associations with Renaissance imitations sheds some light on the general disregard classical realists face in the contemporary art world.

Some forms of pastiche are more intentional than others. The prevalent Post-modern deployment of pastiche embodied by artists like Jeff Koons and Mark Ryden combines various movements and styles with a playful spirit of self-awareness. This form of pastiche goes over quite well in contemporary art circles. On the other hand, the classical realists offer a form of pastiche in that it is unaware. Richard Dyer describes the negative associations with unintentional pastiche:

In one usage, pastiche may be considered unintentional. This is when such and such a work is deemed to have failed to bet what it set out to be and wound up ‘merely as pastiche’. In particular, a work may have aimed to be original but merely fallen into being like something else, and a second rate version at that.<sup>12</sup>

This second rate description of pastiches accurately describes the form of imitation classical realists deploy. In attempting to mimic the grand masters of the past in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, classical realists often fall far short of their skill and ambition and tend to produce unintentional second rate versions of a grand historical tradition.

Classical realists attempt to emulate and even pay homage old masters, yet in doing so they arrive at an unintentional form of pastiche of their beloved painters.

Richard Dyer notes that the long tradition of western art grew from a point of emulation. He distinguishes between emulation and homage: “Emulation is a taken for granted practice of cultural production, one with limited purchase in an age of originality and copyright. Homage, on the other hand, is the deliberate recognition and appreciation of a

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Dyer, *Pastiche*, 2.



specific predecessor, where such practice is no longer the cultural norm.”<sup>13</sup> Within the context of the postmodern art world, classical realists offer up a confusing form of art practice that is all too easy to dismiss. Their work looks like parody, but it is sincere, making it fall deeper down the rungs of the prestigious hierarchies of the contemporary art world. The fact that they continue to be unaware of why this is happening further relegates their work to the margins.

Through this use of pastiche, classical realists arrive at a startling degree of sincerity that makes their work appear quite unusual to viewers accustomed to postmodern forms of irony and parody. The bizarre combination of various artists that classical realists promote reflects the concept of pastiche articulated in Jameson’s essay. Classical realists believe their work is normal and as a result, make and promote paintings that are often quite hilarious, but do so in utter sincerity and seriousness. As Dyer has observed, pastiche can exude extreme amounts of emotion. The degree of emotional sincerity in the work combined with an unintentional engagement with pastiche creates a confusing art object for the contemporary art world. Classical realists collapse categories, mimic styles, and celebrate forms of emotional art making that are somewhat illegible and confusing to many art viewers, connoisseurs, and art historians today.

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Dyer, *Pastiche*, 37

## **Idealism v. Realism**

To begin to unpack these contradictions it is necessary to distinguish between the goals of idealism and realism. *The Art Renewal Center* promotes painters demonstrating both models, and yet there is a historical precedent for viewing these terms as oppositional. By utilizing pastiche, classical realists are able to avoid the messiness of historical conflict among various mimetic representational painting movements in order to present the illusion of a unified front of representational painters throughout time. For the purposes of understanding the difference between idealism and realism, let us examine two paintings by William Bouguereau and Gustave Courbet, both dealing with poverty. As Stephen Eisenman has observed in his essay “The Rhetoric of Realism: Courbet and the Origins of the Avant-Garde,” Gustave Courbet made paintings with the intention of appealing to the poor population of France and honoring the reality of their misery and sacrifice under the bourgeois system. In Courbet’s painting *The Stone Breakers* (1849), [Fig.1] we see a teenaged boy next to an elderly man engaged in back-breaking physical labor. We see the boy’s bleak future in a cycle of poverty mapped onto the painted body of his older male counterpart. The crudeness of the paint reflects the very crudeness of their actions and the demands placed upon their bodies. Eisenman observed that Courbet wanted to make pictures for the lower classes that would empower their sense of identity. This kind of painting confronts traditions of painting idealized figures for an elite audience. It rejects the idealization present in many academic paintings. Courbet looked at the grit and reality of lower class laborers and wanted to recognize the social relations that ideal painters ignored. He sought out to reflect reality

rather than to synthesize reality into a pleasing and digestible consumer product for the wealthy.

Now, let's look at a painting of the poor in France during the 19<sup>th</sup> century by William Bouguereau, who embodies the idealist tradition. His painting *Breton Brother and Sister* [Fig. 2] from 1871, shows a young peasant girl holding her brother on her lap. This painting makes poverty appear quaint, sweet, and humble. The young girl and her brother, with beautiful faces and clean feet look back at the viewer while they sit in the shade of the countryside. They pose for the painting. The composition of their forms feels unnatural and staged. They look at us with shy eyes that seem to ask for very little. There is no need for revolution based on this painting. It is enough to look at this young girl and appreciate her simple beauty while she takes care of her adorable brother. Fronia E. Wissman observed that Bouguereau's numerous paintings of the peasant class appealed to the Parisian public because they allowed them to ignore the harsh reality of poverty:

The Parisian public embraced these peasants, who, unlike those painted by Jean-François Millet, were clean, comely, posed no threat to the social order, and, because they were either placed firmly in the past or were geographically removed, did not remind viewers of the difficult lives led by their own rural countrymen.<sup>14</sup>

Bouguereau painted young peasants in order to appeal and appease the Parisian bourgeois. His paintings made Parisians feel safe rather than critical of the status quo. In contrast, Courbet painted crude images of the working poor to incite an ideological revolution against the bourgeoisie. The classical realist movement today supports both Bouguereau and Courbet without recognizing their fundamental differences. In doing so

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<sup>14</sup> Fronia E. Wissman, *Bouguereau*, (San Francisco: Pomegranate Art, 1996), 33.

they promote an empty model of both Bouguereau's idealism and Courbet's realism that focuses on formal style rather than historical context. These oppositional movements are able to coexist under classical realist philosophy because Ross and others gloss over their histories in favor of their painterly styles. This explains why history does not bubble up to the surface in ateliers, and how pastiche works in the service of the anti-intellectualism rampant in the classical revivalist movement.

### **Lack, Frederick C. Ross, and *The Art Renewal Center***

Various ateliers like *Atelier Lack* opened their doors to teach their vision of classical realism in the seventies, eighties, and nineties, and organizing bodies began to crop up in support of this movement. Richard F. Lack made and published a journal called the *Classical Realism Quarterly* in 1986. According to Gary Christensen, who is currently writing a catalogue raisonné about Richard F. Lack and who founded The American Society of Classical Realism in 1992, "By the time the *CRJ* stopped publications in 2003 it had reached thousands of people worldwide. To ensure the knowledge contained within these publications will continue to enlighten generations to come, the rights to reprint the *CRQ* and *CRJ* were given to the *Art Renewal Center*."<sup>15</sup> So, the most current hub for the classical realist movement is the Art Renewal Center, where articles, journals, and histories from the past Classical Realist Journals and Quarterlies fuse with new information to support its progress. This organization proudly claims to be

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<sup>15</sup> Gary Christensen, "The Original Publication of the Contemporary Realist Movement: American Society of Classical Realism." *The Art Renewal Center*, n.d. [https://www.artrenewal.org/articles/American\\_Society\\_of\\_Classical\\_Realism/ASCR.php](https://www.artrenewal.org/articles/American_Society_of_Classical_Realism/ASCR.php) (retrieved April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

“Leading the revival of realism in the fine arts” on its homepage—and yet we see paintings by Bouguereau. So, like Atelier Lack, this organization supports historical amnesia in its fusing of classical idealism with principles of realism. Founded in the year 2000, this non-profit arts organization is also known as the *American Society for Classical Realism*.<sup>16</sup>

New Jersey businessman and millionaire Frederick C. Ross is the chair of *The Art Renewal Center (ARC)*. As Chair, Ross is responsible for the core of ARC’s philosophical arguments, which offer sweeping critiques of both modern and post-modern art and call for a return to traditional methods and standards in oil painting. After completing an MA in Art Education at Columbia in 1974, Fred Ross became “deeply disillusioned” with the state of the art world. Part of his reactionary dialogue is rooted in his own negative experiences in the higher education system and his deep love for artists like William Bouguereau. While visiting the Clark Art Institute in 1977, Ross saw Bouguereau’s painting *Nymphs and Satyr (1873)* [Fig. 3], which provided the inspiration he needed to spearhead a widespread movement to revive respect for academic classical painting. As he looked at the painting, he realized that Bouguereau was a true genius and that the art historians who criticized him were spewing lies in the service of a modernist agenda. Painted in 1873, *Nymphs and Satyr* fuses classical mythology and idealism to produce an otherworldly vision. This is precisely the model of painting that impressionist and realist painters worked against in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because it was so out of touch with

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<sup>16</sup> Mark Roth. "Gifted artist? Bouguereau's work controversial more than a century after his death", Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. <http://www.post-gazette.com/frontpage/2007/08/20/Gifted-artist-Bouguereau-s-work-controversial-more-than-a-century-after-his-death/stories/200708200191> (Retrieved 23 October 2016).

reality. Furthermore, Bouguereau is a favored whipping post for critics of idealized female nudes. Modernist critics like Greenberg hold the utmost contempt and disdain for this kind of painting. But Ross found himself tired of this narrative. He loves *Nymphs and Satyr* and does not understand why artists, art historians or art critics continue to criticize it. While soaking up this painting, Ross came to the conclusion that art history written about the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries “was nothing but a series of distortions and lies. And this fiction was being taught as art history in virtually every college and university art department in the world.”<sup>17</sup> Rather than come to terms with conflicting opinions about Bouguereau, Ross decided to reject anything negative ever said about the artist. His main purpose now is to restore the art world to its previous principles, to a time before the development of both modern and contemporary art. Disillusioned, angry and frustrated by the “lies” in art history that criticize painters like Bouguereau, Ross founded *The Art Renewal Center* in order to completely refashion the priorities of the art world, art criticism and art history to match his vision. This vision produces an imagined past where idealism and realism coexist free of distinction or animosity. Historical debates and differences melt away as he praises the project of mimetic realism that was so sound before modernists took control.

This movement supports a variety of representational movements across different time periods and lumps them all under the project of classical realism. In the service of a classical realist agenda, *The Art Renewal Center* offers an online museum with artists

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<sup>17</sup> Frederick C. Ross, “What Is Fine Art and Why Realism? Keynote Address Delivered at The Realist Art Conference.” *The Art Renewal Center*. <https://www.artrenewal.org/?p=7177>. November 3, 2015. (Retrieved April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

who embody the “ARC Philosophy.” The list of artists in this museum ranks by popularity and numbers of hits. The list begins with Bouguereau, followed by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Raphael, and Lord Frederick Leighton. Though the top five artists are relatively consistent, the artists in the ARC Museum represent a broad array of contradictory projects. *The Art Renewal Center* celebrates painters as diverse as Norman Rockwell, John William Waterhouse, Caravaggio, Michelangelo, Rubens, Francisco Goya, Edgar Degas, Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, Salvador Dali, Hieronymus Bosch, William Blake, and El Greco. As a result, they seem to consistently misinterpret the motivating factors underlying these various art movements. For example, humanist philosophies have a central place in Ross’s speeches, and yet there is nothing humanist about the surrealist project. In fact, it is radical and nihilistic. But Dali and others seem to make the cut because they demonstrate deft handling of oil paint utilizing a mimetic representational style.<sup>18</sup>

### **Frederick C. Ross’s Speech At the 2015 TRAC Conference**

On November 3<sup>rd</sup> in 2015, hundreds of artists gathered together at The Crown Plaza hotel in Ventura to listen to Frederick C. Ross give the keynote address at *The Representational Art Conference* in service of a classical realist agenda. ARC provided major funding for *The Representational Art Conference*, which created a platform for like-minded classical realists to come together with the aim of sharing concerns and

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<sup>18</sup> Some may find it humorous that both Clement Greenberg and Frederick C. Ross find themselves at a loss for how to account for Surrealism. This certainly goes to show how problematic it can be to generate monolithic master narratives and to attempt to wedge various historical movements into your argument.

ideas.<sup>19</sup> During his speech, Ross provided his philosophy to an eager crowd of classical realist painters. After outlining both the definition and function of fine art, Ross concluded that only realism offers the necessary components of meaningful fine art. Everything else is simply hogwash. This particular speech is a veritable manifesto in the name of contemporary classical realism. It is necessary to examine Ross's words in order to understand the aims and concerns of this movement and to see the tendencies to manipulate historical distinction through collapsing categories and ignoring the nuanced contextual aims of various movements.

Ross believes communication is the key function of fine art. It is not, like many contemporary artists would suggest, to provoke questions or dialogue, but rather it is to communicate answers. And because its primary function is to communicate, it is a type of visual language. Ross claims: "The vocabulary of fine art are the realistic images which we see everywhere throughout our lives. The grammar is made up of the rules and skills needed to successfully and believably render the images and ideas and seamlessly connect them together."<sup>20</sup> Just as clarity and structure of the written word facilitates linguistic communication, so should clear and explicit representational arts. He continues to explain how realistic fine art offers a universal language because any human individual can see it and interpret it. According to Ross, the Modernist paradigm is problematic

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Pierce, an artist with a PhD in British Architecture, is the head of the art department at Cal State Lutheran University. Here, he labors to incorporate the model of the atelier into the University system. It is also worth mentioning that Michael Pierce started a facebook group called "The Representational Art Group" that, as of Nov. 29<sup>th</sup> 2016 has 10,746 members. Though members of this group are not all purists in terms of classical realism, the large scale suggests that this is no small backwater movement. It is much larger than many might guess.

<sup>20</sup> Frederick C. Ross, "What Is Fine Art and Why Realism?" 2015.



because it eliminates “the only universal language that exists: realistic imagery, with the techniques and skills required to achieve it.”

Whether Ross believes in the ability to derive multiple interpretations is up for debate. What is clear is that he supports a certain illustrative model that may limit the overall level of ambiguity or interpretative possibility. Ross supports the idealist model upheld by artists like Bouguereau. In his essay “The Great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art Scam” Ross writes: “It was the artist's goal to show humanity as beautifully real and ideal as possible, encouraging all to strive for such ideals. The message is that while mankind may not be perfect, life can still be good. Implicit is the moral imperative that all people are worthy of love and respect.”<sup>21</sup> Ross locates an uplifting humanist message in his analysis of Bouguereau that maintains that the loss of this ideal model has wrecked the foundations of the art world. Ross believes that Modern art focuses on absence and negativity in the interest of the nihilistic destruction of humanity. Here, Ross reveals his inability to recognize divergent viewpoints. He cannot see the potential negative implications of humanist idealism. He argues in favor of a return to art that could inspire humanity rather than art that is critical of humanity.

This is typical of humanist tenets and has faced criticism from a number of intellectuals. In his text *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger pointed out the contradictions of humanist philosophy, observing that idealization never actually recognized the individual who was meant to be at humanism's center. He writes:

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<sup>21</sup> Frederick C. Ross, “The Great 20th Century Art Scam.” *The Art Renewal Center*, n.d. <https://www.artrenewal.org/articles/Philosophy/ArtScam/artscam.php>.

Dürer believed that the ideal nude ought to be constructed by taking the face of one body, the breasts of another, the legs of a third, the shoulders of a fourth, the hands of a fifth – and so on. The result would glorify Man. But the exercises presumed a remarkable indifference to who any one person really was.<sup>22</sup>

Berger's analysis locates the contradictions in idealistic humanist enterprises that would seek to embody perfection. In doing so, these artworks miss the fundamental individuality of human beings by creating an unrealistic human form no longer attached to reality. This movement is not just about reviving technical skills, it is also about invoking a particular set of humanist philosophies and perspectives that are often connected to totalitarian regimes, as observed, for example, by Clement Greenberg in his essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." and by Hannah Arendt in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. More recently, in his essay "The Body and the Archive," Allan Sekula describes the history of eugenics and phrenology, two racist and classist pseudo-sciences rooted in the replication of classical Greek ideals. The humanist agenda has a muddy and troubled history. Yet Ross refuses to recognize the potential misuse or abuse of humanist paintings in the aims of totalitarian regimes and scientific racism, and instead believes them always to have the capacity for good. This further supports the notion that Ross and the classical realists lift out styles from art history in a form of pastiche without consideration of what those styles connote.

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<sup>22</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 62.

## **Ross's anti-Modernist Philosophy and the Crisis of Originality**

As evidenced in the title of his essay “The Great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art Scam,” one of Fred Ross’s key goals is to expose the sham of Modern Art. To varying degrees this aligns his aims with key postmodernist thinkers like Frederick Jameson and Rosalind Krauss. In his essay, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Jameson recognizes the unfair advantage modernism has had over art institutions and argues for the need to break down those illusions. He writes that postmodernisms are “reactions against the established forms of high modernism, against this or that dominant high modernism which conquered the university, the museum and the art gallery network, and their foundations.”<sup>23</sup> Both Ross and Jameson share a critique of the deep control established forms of high modernisms have over art institutions.

Ross also aligns with Rosalind Krauss to some degree when he observes that the notion of originality is often misguided. He notes that too often realist painters have to justify the originality of their projects. To support this claim Ross observes: “Modernists like to say ‘why waste your time doing realism? It's all been done already.’ That would be exactly like saying ‘Why waste your time writing anything? It's already all been written. There is nothing left to say.’”<sup>24</sup> To Ross, representational painting is the equivalent of written language, so it cannot be attacked because it is a fundamental mode of communication. Out of sync with postmodernist theory, Ross may find it interesting to read up on Rosalind’s Krauss’s critique of the grid in modern art. Krauss notes that modern artists again and again utilize the grid as an underlying structure. She argues that

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<sup>23</sup> Frederic Jameson “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 128.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick C. Ross, “What Is Fine Art and Why Realism?” 2015.

this is in the aim to present something original in the sense that it shakes all previous foundations. Yet she also notes a paradox, that, the grid is a copy of many copies. Furthermore, she asserts, the modernist establishment would have us ignore the fact that the originality the modernist project depends upon is in fact a sham. Krauss notes that the grid copies the surface of the canvas, underlies the legacy of the great muralists and structures the devices used to build perspective. The modernist artists that then repeatedly use the grid not only copy art historical conventions dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but continue to copy their own work in an endless stream of copies according to Krauss. Or, as she would characterize it, “a dizzying fall into a bottomless system of reduplication.”<sup>25</sup> Krauss explains that the modernist project itself maintains the illusion of originality against all evidence.

From this perspective we can see that modernism and the avant-garde are functions of what we could call the discourse of originality, and that discourse serves much wider interests—and is thus fueled by more diverse institutions—than the restricted circle of professional art-making. The theme of originality, encompassing as it does the notions of authenticity, originals, and origins, is the shared discursive practice of the museum, the historian, and the maker of art. And throughout the nineteenth century all of these institutions were concerned, together, to find the mark, the warrant, the certification of the original.<sup>26</sup>

Both Ross and Krauss observe the investments and systems at play in upholding a myth of originality for modernism and the avant-garde. Ross’s arguments, in their deep critique of the unfair attention paid to modernist artists in fact align to a degree with Krauss’s critique. But he is too far removed from this dialogue to recognize how it may operate in the service of his agenda.

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<sup>25</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 161.

<sup>26</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 162.

Although Ross supports modern artists like Edouard Manet and Salvador Dali, he believes that modernism in general is elitist. This Columbia educated millionaire notes that, “Academically trained realist artists of the 19th Century were accused of being elitist. But what could be more elitist than saying "only we enlightened" can understand what Rothko, Warhol, De-Kooning and Pollock were saying?”<sup>27</sup> This opens up a potentially dangerous anti-intellectualism that does not allow viewers to consider historical context as central to understanding various modes of art production. Rather than give modern art movements fair consideration or offer insight to their various historical contexts, Ross writes them off as irrelevant and elitist. He positions himself as the arbiter of quality, utilizing contradictory and historically inaccurate categories. Ross believes that realistic art is superior because it can appeal to a broad range of individuals. History bears this out given that socialist, communist, and fascist movements turned to realist styles in order to more effectively communicate to mass populations. Following this line of inquiry Ross also criticizes the role art historians play in perpetuating false narratives: “Art history must not be reduced to little more than propaganda directed towards market enhancement for valuable collections passed down as wealth conserving stores of value.”<sup>28</sup> Many contemporary art historians and critics would agree with this statement and there is some validity to Ross’s point about the inflated value of canonized modern art works by artists like Picasso, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. However, the reputations of representational artists like Michelangelo, Raphael, Albrecht Durer, and Leonardo DaVinci have also benefitted from art historical canonization. So, not all

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<sup>27</sup> Frederick C. Ross, “What Is Fine Art and Why Realism?” 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Frederick C. Ross, “What Is Fine Art and Why Realism?” 2015.

art history works against classical realists, just the art history that supports modernist narratives.

Yet, rather than taking issue with capitalism, white-hetero-patriarchy, or the gallery and museum system, Ross takes issue with the fact that the artwork he likes does not receive its fair share of the pie. Ross and his classical realists in that sense do not want to tear down museums or break apart the systems of art dealership. They just want their rightful chunk of institutional validity. They also want to see an equation between effort, skill and hard work and the value of an art object. They do not want to eliminate the forces that perpetuate the celebrity art culture. Ross in fact praises the structure of the art market and its process of funneling pictures to the wealthy: “The fact is that most often, it is the wealthy who buy art. Rather than using this fact to condemn the artists, it should be the basis for praising those individuals who recognized and helped support greatness. What would the Renaissance have been without Lorenzo de Medici?”<sup>29</sup> Ross sees no problems with wealthy patrons supporting artists. And Ross also observes that this trend is not under the sole purview of 19<sup>th</sup> century academic painters. 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist artists also gain their fair share of the wealth. Instead of throwing away the golden spoon that supports the art market, Ross wants a classical realist version of Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol.

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<sup>29</sup> Frederick C. Ross, “The Great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art Scam.”

## **Anti-Intellectualism and Prestige Suggestion**

A strong vein of anti-intellectualism runs through the ARC Philosophy. Fred Ross and fellow classical realists mock the theory heavy art world that would have viewers pay more attention to a work of art by Mondrian than Bouguereau. This form of anti-intellectualism tends to be anti-conceptual. Ross's anti-conceptual arguments have some kernel of truth, yet they ignore nuance and as a result cannot sufficiently critique the art world. The classical realist mode of anti-conceptualism and anti-intellectualism bubbles to the surface when Ross criticizes the role of "prestige suggestion," which he defines as the rampant cloaking of prestige around subpar modern and contemporary artworks through targeted language that implies it is valuable and difficult to understand. Ross argues that the use of "prestige suggestion," blinds people from seeing the "intrinsic quality" inherent in works by classical oil painters, past and present. To this end, Ross also criticizes the role of "art-speak" in inflating art value. He shows a video from Sotheby's that uses "art-speak" to instill Cy Twombly's oil painting with significance and value. To Ross's credit, the video is preposterous in its explicit need to endow a single art object with a twelve million pound value. Museums and galleries do inflate objects with astronomical value in the service of making money. Their "prestige suggestion" can be completely out of touch with reality. Yet, Ross contradicts himself by replacing one form of prestige suggestion with another. Rather than consult Sotheby's for advice, Ross would argue that art connoisseurs should ask his advice. Again, he positions himself as the arbiter of good taste and high art.

In reference to Clement Greenberg's criticism of the false and theatrical nature of illusionistic painting, Ross contends: "Isn't it just as much a part of the truth that the artist who wishes to express a shared human emotion needs to hide the flatness of the picture plane in order to enable the viewers to suspend disbelief the same way that works in theatre?"<sup>30</sup> Here, Ross uses theatre as an analogy to painting in order to defend the cause of suspending disbelief and generating fictitious worlds in the arts. Ross often compares the project of painting to other art forms, including music, theatre, dance and literature. He argues that music and literature still incorporate fundamental vocabulary structures and that it is to the detriment of the fine art project that vocabulary no longer exists. Ross also notes that the statements modern art makes are crass and obvious: "After all, any three-year-old who is taken to a museum knows that the canvases are all flat. How great then was it that Cezanne and Matisse spent the rest of their careers saying it over and over again?"<sup>31</sup> Ross provides his own version of the common criticism "my kid could do that" that so often echoes in contemporary art museums. He is relentless in his attack on modern art and in doing so ignores any historical or cultural impetuosity contained within the project.

Ross believes that the gate-keepers of the art world work together using "prestige suggestion", "Art-speak", and "Political-correctness"<sup>32</sup> to keep classical realists down. To classical realists, politically correct critiques about art are problematic since they undermine the notion of a masterpiece and often work to destabilize the foundations of

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<sup>30</sup> Frederick C. Ross, "What Is Fine Art and Why Realism?" 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Frederick C. Ross, "What Is Fine Art and Why Realism?" 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Frederick C. Ross, "What Is Fine Art and Why Realism?" 2015.



traditional Western art history. Classical realists often shut their eyes to the teachings of social art history, feminist art history, or post-colonial art history since that would involve acknowledging fundamental issues in their definition of great art. In his article, “Oppressors Accuse their Victims of Oppression: Modernist Tactic Exposed,” Ross writes, “If they can make people who don't like their work fear being labeled as right wing extremists or “oppressors” then they have effectively silenced their opposition, in the name of freedom of expression.”<sup>33</sup> He sees himself and other representational painters as the oppressed victims of Modernist ideologies embedded in museums, galleries and universities. Again, Ross simplifies a more complex issue in order to celebrate classical realism. Yes, there are deep investments in the modernist art project, and indeed there are many canonized modern paintings that obtain astronomical prices. Ross does not see how the hierarchies of the academies of the past also worked to exclude other modes of painting and to obtain a monopoly over art production and exhibition for the few. Idealist painting practices produced their own exclusionary narratives that rejected other forms of art. He criticizes the power and exclusivity of Modern art but does not acknowledge how his proposal would replace one master narrative with another.

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<sup>33</sup> Frederick C. Ross, “Oppressors Accuse Their Victims of Oppression: Modernist Tactic Exposed.” *The Art Renewal Center*, n.d. <https://www.artrenewal.org/articles/2004/Oppression/ross.php>. (Retrieved April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

## The Scope of the Classical Realist Movement

Perusing *The Art Renewal Center* website, one finds that the scope of the organization stretches far beyond Frederick C. Ross's diatribes. The website offers links to numerous lectures by various artists and art historians, books, journals, articles and videos that support classical realism. There is also a "Living Masters Gallery" that lists contemporary living master oil painters who demonstrate the technical and conceptual underpinnings of the classical realist movement. Every year ARC conducts an online salon contest that culminates in real exhibitions to locate new living masters to add to an ever-growing list of classical realist painters. Another page on the website provides a list of "ARC Approved Academies and Ateliers." *The Art Renewal Center* places a stamp of approval on institutions that model the "correct" form of artistic education. As a sign of solidarity, such ateliers display their "ARC approved" status on their websites to prospective applicants.

Ross concluded his speech on November 3<sup>rd</sup> of 2015 by noting how much "progress" this movement seemed to be making. According to Ross, "The new Realism movement now has thousands of artists. That is a staggering turn-around from the handful who were working 30 years ago. There are over 70 ARC Approved Atelier based schools today and several waiting to be vetted."<sup>34</sup> His polemic tone signifies a movement void of self-awareness or the capacity to offer internal critique. Ross believes that it is only a matter of time before classical realism takes its rightful place in the center of the art world and the art market. Furthermore, Ross noted that the movement has expanded

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<sup>34</sup> Frederick C. Ross, "What Is Fine Art and Why Realism?" 2015.

rapidly. This is evident in the ever-increasing development of "atelier" teaching institutions that offer classical realist instruction. "Back in 1980," Ross remembered, "we searched everywhere; we could find only seven tiny schools that had been five and ten students per school." Now, according to Ross, there are "so many schools and so many more being planned." He has also boasted about *The Da Vinci Initiative*, which recently provided atelier training for high school teachers in New Jersey. According to its website:

The Da Vinci Initiative is a 501(c)(3) non-profit education foundation that supports skill-based learning in K-12 art classrooms. The Da Vinci Initiative believes that the most creative children are those with the most tools at their disposal for making artwork, and provides atelier training and resources to art teachers to help them incorporate skill-based methods into their classroom practices.<sup>35</sup>

This initiative sends atelier trained "ambassadors" to K-12 teaching conferences to share the benefits of atelier training and instruction. The classical realist movement is already shifting the way K-12 students receive instruction. This is one of many reasons it is important to consider the goals, aspirations and implications of both Frederick C. Ross and *The Art Renewal Center*. Though there are benefits to skill-oriented art education, what does it mean for quality education that a proponent of classical realism with strong biases and huge gaps in art historical knowledge now has a direct line to educating K-12 instructors?

Ross is not only encouraging shifts in the K-12 curriculum, he is also encouraging university art students to stage rebellions against their conceptually orientated art departments. Ross wrote an inflammatory letter to art students and published it on ARC's

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<sup>35</sup> Kara Lysandra Ross and Mandy Hallenius. "A Mission for Visual Literacy." *The Da Vinci Initiative*, n.d. <http://www.davinciinitiative.org/mission.html>. (Retrieved April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

website. He begins with a warning about the kinds of art teachers at universities: “Having received hundreds of letters and spoken to hundreds of people, I can categorically say that there are people called teachers in university art departments who know nothing, wield power corruptly, and are highly destructive to one young mind after another.”<sup>36</sup> Here he refers to the letters of discontent he receives from students at university art programs who feel they have not received a real education. Rather than look for a middle ground, Ross labels the majority of art educators as corrupt, unskilled and ineffectual individuals. Ross also sees a deep problem in the structure and implementation of art education and he recognizes that part of the solution to changing the art world is changing how artists are taught. He even offers to support students if they want to hold a protest in their own art department: “If you think circumstances are such that you can organize a student rebellion, and if you have support from other students, and perhaps even a faculty member or two, then let us know and we'll try to support you online, but nobody has to sit and take it very long in America.”<sup>37</sup> Rooted in a nationalist rhetoric that exhorts students to take the art educational system back into rightful hands, one cannot help but draw connections between the dialogue of this movement and a larger argumentative structure backing the conservative rebellion against intellectualism that has been brewing for some time in the United States. The questions and concerns surrounding the existence of this movement have particular salience in our contemporary political climate.

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<sup>36</sup> Frederick C. Ross, “*Advice to Art Students.*” *The Art Renewal Center*, n.d. <https://www.artrenewal.org/pages/archives.php?articleid=1385>. (Retrieved April 20<sup>th</sup> 2017).

<sup>37</sup> Frederick C. Ross, “*Advice to Art Students.*”

Ross' aspirations show that the classical realist movement is using education to spread its ahistorical philosophy. Without access to the top museums and galleries, classical realists are changing the nature of the art world from the bottom up with small classical atelier programs and changes to the K-12 curriculum. There is much more work to be done quantifying the effect this movement has on K-12 curriculum and it is possible that in the vacuum of funding for public arts education, this conservative movement may sweep in to fill the void with an historically confused and idealistic model of art education for young students. But even if this movement does find a foothold in K-12 education, it still remains illegible to the larger art world. As a result, it is unlikely that the classical realist will stand in the limelight of the art world any time soon.

### **Classical Realism and Postmodernism**

Ross and the majority of classical realist artists tend to avoid the term postmodern, instead fixing on the debate between representational painters and modernists. This could be the case for a number of reasons. First, Ross completed his MA in the 1970's when post-modernism was only beginning to take shape. It is possible that he gained a deep awareness of modernist issues, but never really considered the role of representation within the context of the post-modern. Second, in a more general sense, for classical realists, post-modernism seems like an irrelevant extension of the key problem: modernism. The debate classical realists are most interested in is one that took place in the later portion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that echoed a long standing framework of the debate between the ancients and the moderns. So while it would help their arguments to consider

post-modernist critiques of modernism, they avoid the subject altogether in favor of maintaining a clear binary relationship between academic representation and modernism. This is another example of how the classical realist movement tends to simplify larger issues in the aim of constructing all arguments in favor of an anti-intellectual model of classical realism.

And, perhaps there are good reasons for this. While this movement has an ample number of followers, and uses some arguments that align with the assertions of hallmark arguments by postmodernist thinkers like Rosalind Krauss and Frederic Jameson, classical realism has yet to become legible to our postmodern art world. This is because Ross tries to have his cake and eat it too. He wants to dismantle the large metanarrative of modernism, but rather than replacing this with a postmodern vision of multiple narratives that just so happen to include a classical realist project, Ross wants to promote his own limited narrative. In his book *After the End of Art*, Arthur Danto notes that we have entered into a new kind of art period that moves beyond the manifesto. The grand modernist narratives do not characterize our perception of art. Danto observes that “The manifesto defines a certain kind of movement, and a certain kind of style, which the manifesto more or less proclaims as the only kind of art that matters.”<sup>38</sup> By creating a classical realist movement in opposition to modernism, Ross and classical realists operate along modernism’s own old fashioned manifesto rules. To contemporary thinkers modernist manifestos are silly, unnecessary and outdated because it is not longer necessary to operate along oppositional lines. According to Danto, in the post-historical

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<sup>38</sup> Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 28.

moment there are still magazines that speak using manifestos, and this will necessarily have to come to an end. Through the lens of Arthur Danto's arguments, the inconsistencies of the classical realist project come to light. Classical realism promotes 19<sup>th</sup> century academic painting using outmoded 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist tactics in a 21<sup>st</sup> century postmodern art world.

The next chapter will delve into the nature of atelier programs into more detail in order to gain more insight into the classical realist movement. It will also explain why the classical realists, in spite of ever increasing numbers, catalogues, and spokespersons remain rejected and cast aside from the central hierarchy of the art world.

## **Chapter II: What Are Ateliers and how do they depart from traditional Academies by upholding anti-intellectual structures?**

This next chapter explores the role of education in its ability to perpetuate the classical realist philosophy and stylistic agenda. The chapter begins with a history of academies, then describes atelier programs, and concludes by weaving together the similarities and differences between the two. This chapter will argue that contemporary Ateliers are very similar in their mission and curriculum to Academies of the past, but they differ in their degree of implementation of theory and their social status. This chapter will further reinforce the main thesis argument that classical realists use pastiche to bend historical conventions in service of their anti-intellectual aims. Classical realists created their own version of the academy and did away with the theoretical academic underpinnings that would force them to reconcile their own internal contradictions.

### **A Brief History of Academies and Ateliers**

Before we can truly understand the contemporary atelier, we must go back to the initial history of academies. First, as Nikolaus Pevsner observed in his text *Academies of art, past and present*, the concept of the academy itself dates back to Plato's academy and is rooted in philosophical and intellectual discourse. During the Renaissance, Italian humanists eager to follow the footsteps of Greek intellectual practices resuscitated the concept of an academy.<sup>39</sup> These first academies were often disorganized and inconsistent, especially when compared to the rigidity of the university education system at the time. These early academies taught a range of disciplinary practices including medicine,

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<sup>39</sup> Nicholas Pevsner, *Academies of art past and present* (New York: University Press, 1940), 1.



natural history, law, divinity and archeology. In the first Renaissance academies, a new space opened up for free debate and talk that distinguished itself from “the scholastic pedantry of the university.”<sup>40</sup> The concept of academies also infiltrated the Northern Renaissance in Germany. The first versions of German academies include *Sodalitas Literaria Rhenana* and *Sodalitas Literaria Danubiana*. Pevsner explains that in Italy, Universities began going under name “Academy” because it was a “fashionable word, so pleasantly reminiscent of Antiquity and Renaissance.”<sup>41</sup> In a somewhat ironic twist, academies began as free thinking circles of information exchange. Pevsner notes:

The Italian academies of about 1500 had expressed the free and bold spirit of the High Renaissance, its enthusiasm for Antiquity, and its wide interests. As soon as the Renaissance broke down, and was superseded by Mannerism in art and by all the tendencies leading up to the counter-Reformation in general history, academies ceased to be as informal and loose as they had been.<sup>42</sup>

So, although they had a free and spontaneous beginning and initially stood for all that was experimental and exciting during the Renaissance, academies morphed into the rigid structures we know today after the close of that time period. Pevsner locates the counter Reformation and the development of Mannerism as key contributors to the extinction of free flowing thought and organic exchange of knowledge in the west.

The first unofficial art academy, was most likely the *Accademia Leonardi Vinci*. Pevsner suggests that this academy was informal and consisted of a collection of gathering artists and scholars. It is with Leonardo that we have the record of a philosophical desire to distinguish the act of painting from manual skill and to elevate it

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<sup>40</sup> Nicholas Pevsner, *Academies of art past and present*, 6.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Nicholas Pevsner, *Academies of art past and present*, 7.

among the level of liberal arts and sciences. This breaks with the traditional development of the painter in the guild or apprenticeship system and provides the opportunity for the artists to rise in social ranking. Michelangelo also pushed the notion that painting and sculpture were arts and not crafts. This did come at a certain price. In making the claim of artistic genius and privileging individual expression "...the public on which a painter or sculptor could count on lost in numbers what it gained in value, and at the same time the painter and sculptor lost in social security what he gained in social status."<sup>43</sup> This problem continues to this day as artists continue to struggle to gain respect without a clear role in society. They find themselves misunderstood, and often disrespected, yet capable of entering the highest ranks of class and society should they achieve success and fame.

It is important to draw a distinction between traditional academies and 21<sup>st</sup> century ateliers because contemporary ateliers use terms interchangeably and operate as a fusion of the two models. Academies were larger official institutions. These include in *The Accademia del Disegno* Florence, and *The Royal Academy* in London, which educated a relatively larger number of artists when compared to the smaller counterpart in ateliers. Academies did not offer formal instruction in painting to the same extent that they taught the fundamental skills of drawing and oversaw competitions. According to Carl Goldstein, "Painting itself, as a technical practice, was rarely taught in academies, which were adamant in their refusal to engage the actual conditions of artistic production. (The techniques of painting were "picked up" by watching, and receiving instruction

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<sup>43</sup> Nicholas Pevsner, *Academies of art past and present*, 36.

from, painters in the studios.)”<sup>44</sup> The term Atelier is French in origin, and describes a model of apprenticeship that traces back to the Middle Ages. After the French Revolution in 1793, the French academy legally dismantled. Its reappearance took the form of two new institutions in 1795 including the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, and the *École des Beaux-Arts*.<sup>45</sup> The *École* did not take just any artist. It had a competition for entry, which meant that it took advanced students who had already built up their skills by studying in private ateliers under artists like Jacques-Louis David, Delaroche, Couture, and Gleyre.<sup>46</sup> Under the apprentice model of education that began in the middle ages, artists studied with a master craftsman and aided that person in their work while also learning skills.<sup>47</sup> Ateliers were both extensions of the apprentice model where smaller groups of students studied in the studio of a single artist. Students seeking painting skills had to learn from artists in studios outside of the official academy. It was not until 1863 in France that the *École* incorporated workshops for architecture, sculpture and painting, thus eliminating the private atelier as a feeder into academies. This broadened the geographic influence of the academic model because it allowed foreign students to enter the workshops run through the *École*.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Carl Goldstein, *Teaching Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 225.

<sup>45</sup> Carl Goldstein, *Teaching Art*, 58.

<sup>46</sup> Carl Goldstein, *Teaching Art*, 58.

<sup>47</sup> Nicholas Houghton, “Six into One: The Contradictory Art School Curriculum and How It Came About.” *The International Journal of Art & Design Education* 35, no. 1 (2016), 109.

<sup>48</sup> Carl Goldstein, *Teaching Art*, 58.

## Philosophies and Curricula in Contemporary Atelier Programs

Now that we have come to terms with basic understanding of traditional academies and ateliers, let us examine the contemporary manifestation of the atelier that classical realists use to educate artists. The contemporary atelier is a relatively small, non-accredited art school that claims to focus its curriculum on skill based 19<sup>th</sup> century academic training.<sup>49</sup> Ateliers offer a useful window into the contemporary classical realist movement since they embody the model of education that many classical realists support. Frederick C. Ross sees the increasing number of ateliers across the country as a sign of the power and progress of the classical realist movement. There are 64 *Art Renewal Center Approved* atelier programs listed on ARC's website. They earned their ARC approval since they meet the criteria of skill-based training. Quite a few of these ateliers display their ARC approval in prominent positions on their websites in order to signify their standards of excellence to prospective students. Frederick C. Ross cautions artists against attending a typical arts program at a university or college. According to Frederick C. Ross, "ARC Approval" is a higher indicator of institutional quality and skill based educational models than university accreditation since universities no longer prioritize technical skill.<sup>50</sup> The message is clear: if you want to gain access to the classical training you need as a classical realist painter, you can find the skills you are looking for from "ARC Approved" ateliers.

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<sup>49</sup> The fact that they are not accredited may be by choice. They have more flexibility and don't have to respond to curricular requirements that accredited institutions need to uphold.

<sup>50</sup> Frederick C. Ross "ARC Approved Ateliers." *The Art Renewal Center*, n.d. <https://www.artrenewal.org/pages/ateliers.php>. (Retrieved April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

Many of these ateliers outline their philosophy and 19<sup>th</sup> century teaching methodologies with pride in their promotional materials. And, as mentioned earlier, they do not seem to understand the historical distinction between an academy or an atelier and as a result use the terms interchangeably to describe the same model of teaching. *The London Atelier of Representational Art (LARA)* founded in 2008, is “resurrecting time tested skills traditionally passed from one generation to the next.”<sup>51</sup> Within one statement we see the importance of skill, tradition and mentorship that lies at the heart of contemporary atelier programs. Ateliers take pride in pointing out the insufficient level of instruction at university art programs that contrasts with the rigorous amount of skill-oriented education at atelier programs. The key selling point of these institutions is that they distinguish themselves from university art education models. For example, LARA describes itself as a: “well resourced and highly professional atelier, established in 2008 in response to the rarity of rigorous, representational art education.”<sup>52</sup> LARA considers itself a “unique” institution because it offers skill based training and the opportunity to work from direct observation of live models. LARA sets itself apart from other art programs because it promotes a “return to discipline in art.” The philosophy of LARA and other ateliers promotes skill, labor, and hard work in order to support the notion that anyone who applies themselves to the project of drawing and painting can develop into a master. This also reflects early criticisms against Modernist art, which accused the practice of being unskilled, too easy, and even lazy.

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<sup>51</sup> “LARA Philosophy.” *LARA*, n.d. <http://www.drawpaintsculpt.com/> (Retrieved April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*

In fact, it is difficult to distinguish between the philosophies of the various atelier programs. So many include variations on the same themes. Consider the following statement from *The Academy of Realist Art in Boston* founded in 2008 by Cindy MacMillan: “We model our curriculum and teaching techniques on the 19th-century European academies with the aim of helping students achieve the highest caliber of skills possible.” Or, examine this statement from *The Aristides Atelier*, founded by Juliette Aristides in 1999, which claims that the school is: “based on the teaching methods of the 19th-century tradition, [and] offers serious art students the opportunity to study classical drawing and painting techniques with master artist Juliette Aristides.”<sup>53</sup> Certain key words and phrases begin to surface in the atelier philosophies including: 19<sup>th</sup> century, academic training, master, skill, technique, time-tested, discipline, craft, standards, personal instruction, drawing from life...etc. For example, *The Barcelona Academy of Art*, founded in 2013, boasts of its “return to discipline in art” and curriculum that has been “tested” and offers “efficient techniques.”<sup>54</sup> In fact, it is tempting to even make up an atelier and add *Chiaroscuro Studio of Art*’s philosophy as a description: “[Insert Atelier Name of Choice Here]’s curriculum is based on the teaching method used by the famous classical-realist 19th century academies. This kind of training provides a solid artistic basis, allowing the students to achieve high standards of craftsmanship and technical skills.”<sup>55</sup> All joking aside, this thought exercise establishes that there is a degree

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<sup>53</sup> “The Aristides Atelier.” *Gage Academy of Art*, n.d.<http://www.gageacademy.org/ateliers/> (Retrieved April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

<sup>54</sup> “Barcelona Academy of Art.” *Barcelona Academy of Art*, <http://www.academyofartbarcelona.com/> (Retrieved April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

<sup>55</sup> “Chiaroscuro Studio of Art.” Chiaroscuro Studio of Art <http://www.chiaroscurostudioofart.com/about.htm>. (Retrieved April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

of consistency across these ateliers to the point where they can be described as a coherent phenomenon that is connected to the goals of reviving classical traditions of academic painting.

One might ask, what exactly is the curriculum these ateliers boast about? A typical atelier program often follows a progression from drawing to painting and privileges working from life with close mentorship and guidance. The differences are a matter of degree rather than kind. Some studios like *The Florence Academy of Art* adhere to a strict principle of working from natural light. Others do not care about natural or artificial light so long as students work from life. A number of ateliers offer gradated levels of drawing building up to painting. *The Grand Central Atelier* in New York offers a four-year core curriculum. The first year begins with drawing from casts and live models. The second year focuses on painting the human figure from observation. And the third and fourth years are artist in residency programs. The curriculum of *The Academy of Realist Art* in Boston breaks down into several stages beginning with Charles Barge master copies, Charcoal cast drawings, Cast paintings, full color still life paintings, drawing from a model and finally painting from a model. *Classic Art Atelier*, founded in 2012 and located in the Netherlands, has twelve specified modules of education spread out over three years of curriculum. This atelier also begins with Charles Barge master copies, then moves on to cast drawing and painting and follows with anatomy, life drawing, portrait painting, copying old master paintings, and still life painting. This atelier also concludes modules with vague names like “Authenticity”,

“Entrepreneurship”, and “Practical Teaching.” The final module is an “End show” which is presumably a culminating exhibition of artwork.

### **Adam Gopnik visits The Grand Central Atelier**

Though the larger academic discourse in universities studying art history has not picked up on this phenomenon, there are times when it bubbles up to the surface in mainstream media sources. New Yorker art critic Adam Gopnik recently wrote an article called “Life Studies” about his experience studying at an ARC approved institution called *The Grand Central Atelier* in New York. Of all atelier instructors to study under, Gopnik stumbled upon one at the center of the classical realist movement and the atelier philosophy of education, Jacob Collins, who is the key teacher and theoretician behind several classical realist institutions in New York. Collins founded *The Water Street Atelier*, and *The Grand Central Atelier* (also known as *The Grand Central Academy of Art*). He also developed the *Hudson River Fellowship* that carries on the traditions of 19<sup>th</sup> century American *Hudson River School*.<sup>56</sup> Gopnik’s experience with Jacob Collins provides a useful case-study of a specific atelier program that discourages a connection to the contemporary art world, encourages anti-intellectualism, and promotes 19<sup>th</sup> century academic instruction.

During his lessons with Collins, Gopnik observes how Collins operates within a subculture of classical realists who seek to return to academic traditions. Collins is a hard

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<sup>56</sup> Jacob Collins. “Jacob Collins Biography.” *Jacob Collins Paintings*, n.d.<http://www.jacobcollinspaintings.com/biography.html>. (Retrieved April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).



liner. He has a personal disdain for Manet, and a larger frustration with art since 1860. He also takes issue with representational painters who try to adjust to contemporary market demands. Collins seeks nothing short of a full overhaul of the modernist paradigm. Gopnik describes the connections between the *Grand Central Atelier* that Collins founded, and more traditional 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century models. He even observes that while stepping inside of this academy he felt transported back in time: “I was in a series of rooms that could have been found in Paris at the Académie in 1855 or, for that matter, in Rome in 1780. Easels everywhere, and among them plaster casts of classical statues, improbably white and grave and well-muscled and oversized.”<sup>57</sup> These traditional ateliers replicate both the philosophical and physical qualities of the academic past. They operate as a safe haven for like-minded artists. Sheltered from the trends of modern and postmodern artistic production, classical realists can hone their skills without interruption or criticism.

Adam Gopnik asks Jacob Collins why he does not incorporate elements of modern life into his work. Why not include items that resemble our times? Collins offers a frustrated retort to the premise of this question: “Why didn’t Michelangelo draw people buying fish, instead of nudes and gods? He was looking for some idea of beauty, rooted in this world ... that didn’t need an iPod to justify it. He really had an idea of timeless beauty.”<sup>58</sup> This notion of timelessness underlies the philosophical foundation of classical realism, which views modern art as mere trend in the pages of art history. Many of these

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<sup>57</sup> Adam Gopnik “Life Studies: What I Learned When I Learned How to Draw,” *The New Yorker*, June 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/06/27/life-studies>. (Retrieved June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

painters feel as though their work will stand the test of centuries, while modernist and post-modernist artwork will fall to the wayside once everyone realizes they are looking at the artistic manifestation of an emperor with no clothes.

Though their philosophies and curriculum have a high degree of overlap, one can begin to tease apart the differences between these ateliers based on their relationship to the contemporary art world. Some ateliers, like those run by Jacob Collins, avoid mentioning the application this technique may have to contemporary art making practices. Many ateliers show student drawings and paintings that look like class exercises from 19<sup>th</sup> century academies, and do not appear to be works motivated by a 21<sup>st</sup> century student's personal vision or ideas. However, the training at these schools does not always inhibit students from creating engaging contemporary art. Student work at select programs demonstrates a variety of painterly techniques and conceptual frameworks. Some programs, like *The New York Academy of Art*, encourage students to create work that resonates with the contemporary art world, but has a figurative grounding. LARA's alumni work also reflects students who have been able to use principles of skill-based training and apply them to contemporary subjects. On the other end of the spectrum however, *The Florence Academy of Art* displays alumni work that bears little to no relation to our contemporary culture. Though a handful of alumni from *The Florence Academy of Art* dip their toes into contemporary figures or subjects, there seems to be a fixed aesthetic at the institution. This is interesting because the Florence Academy of Art denies that it teaches any particular style and celebrates the diverse expressions of its students. There is a clear difference here between the claim of the Florence Academy and

the reality of their alumni work.<sup>59</sup> This fissure among ateliers reflects a larger divide in the contemporary figurative art world between more extreme classical figurative painters who refuse to adopt contemporary themes or practices and more moderate figurative painters who see the potential value in adopting contemporary theories, practices and techniques to their traditional styles.

One may wonder what all the fuss is about given recent polls that reveal the increased presence and value of figurative artwork in the art auction market.<sup>60</sup> Though this may appear to be a step in the “right” direction for classical realists, it is important to point out that these images do not reflect classical realist goals and aspirations. Top figurative earners including Jenny Saville, Peter Doig, Alice Neel, Dana Schutz, Elizabeth Peyton, Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin, all of whom create work that has the stamp of modernism and post-modernism. These artists pick and choose styles and concepts from various art periods to create post-modern reinterpretations of figurative painting traditions. Some of them, particularly Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin, poke fun at the very traditions and conventions of the nude that classical realists uphold. For

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<sup>59</sup> According to Sean Forester, Graduate and former Director of Art History at *The Florence Academy of Art*, this school is contemporary precisely because it is slow: “While the curriculum of the *The Florence Academy of Art* is rooted in classical tradition, we make art for the contemporary world. In this globalized and fast-paced time, many people are returning to the authenticity of fine craftsmanship: slow food, handmade furniture, bespoke clothing, traditional dance and martial arts, and of course, music, where academies like Julliard and Curtis Institute continue the classical tradition. Similarly, The Florence Academy of Art seeks to carry forward the best of the Western art tradition with an emphasis on craftsmanship and a humanist perspective.”

Sean Forester. “Historical Review.” *The Florence Academy of Art*, March 26, 2012. <http://www.florenceacademyofart.com/index.php/en/history/historical-review>.

<sup>60</sup> “Figurative Painting’s Market Boom, in 5 Charts.” *Artsy Editorial*. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-figurative-painting-s-market-boom-in-5-charts>. (Retrieved June 3, 2016).

example, Lisa Yuskavage's painting *Balls*<sup>61</sup> mocks the legacy of a reclining female nude by exaggerating the shapely forms of her figure and dotting her stomach with gumballs. She uses parody to undermine the "normal" conventions of the nude. When one compares this painting to Jacob Collins' *Red Head* [Fig. 4], one cannot help but notice the high degree of sincerity in Collins' work and pick up the tension between the two paintings. Collins reclining red head looks much closer to the 19<sup>th</sup> century French academic painting *The Pearl and the Wave* by Paul-Jacques-Aimé Baudry in 1862 than anything in the 21<sup>st</sup> century art world. Collins is attempting to create a sincere version of a female nude that could stand the test of centuries. His form of pastiche draws on 19<sup>th</sup> century-style nudes without sarcasm or irony. Yuskavage's work, on the other hand, appropriates the vocabulary of the nude for the purposes of irony, humor and parody. Her work is firmly embedded in her own time, not in the values of the past. In doing so, Yuskavage makes light of paintings like Collins' nude red haired woman. It is no wonder Collins finds other contemporary figurative work frustrating.

### **How Contemporary Ateliers are both similar to and different from traditional Academies and Ateliers**

In summary, contemporary ateliers, in offering relatively public access to step-by-step painting and drawing instruction are a fusion of the traditional academies and traditional ateliers. Contemporary ateliers also may have one head instructor, like Jacob

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<sup>61</sup> Yuskavage, Lisa. *Balls*. Oil on Linen, 2004. To view this painting visit: <http://www.yuskavage.com/artwork/3966>.

Collins or Juliette Aristides, who pulls in students who want to learn under a specific artist just as traditional atelier students used to learn from artists like Jacques Louis David. But they also offer structured curriculum and coursework in a similar fashion to traditional academies. Furthermore, while traditional academies did not incorporate female models until the later portion of 19<sup>th</sup> century, ateliers of course incorporate female models and do not bar female students from entry into their institutions.

The *Accademia del Disegno* in Florence was the first official academy of art.<sup>62</sup> Founded in 1563, this academy distinguished itself from artists' clubs by emphasizing liberal arts and a more formal structure to the educational model. They claimed to be at the center of a humanist learning tradition and used the term *disegno* to refer to “intellectual, not manual activity.”<sup>63</sup> Following the *Florence Academy*, the *Roman Academy* founded in 1577 instituted a more rigorous structure to its educational system and incorporated a consistent level of liberal arts course offerings.<sup>64</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, in his series of lectures to *The Royal Academy* in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century also argued that fine art ought to be viewed as a liberal art: “This is the ambition I could wish to excite in your minds; and the object I have had in my view, throughout this discourse, is that one great idea which gives to painting its true dignity, that entitles it to the name of a Liberal Art, and ranks it as a sister of poetry.”<sup>65</sup> This is interesting to consider given the general avoidance of the liberal arts and art theory at contemporary atelier programs. They steer away from incorporating liberal arts educational models and in fact stand in strict

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<sup>62</sup> Carl Goldstein, *Teaching Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 10.

<sup>63</sup> Carl Goldstein, *Teaching Art*, 17.

<sup>64</sup> Carl Goldstein, *Teaching Art*, 32.

<sup>65</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art* (Los Angeles: Peruse Press, 2013), 50.

opposition to the 21<sup>st</sup> century university. They carry on one portion of the academic tradition, but they do not carry on the emphasis on liberal arts values. In this way, they cite the legacy of academies but reiterate the traditional role of ateliers as sites where artists learn craft and technique outside of a larger intellectual educational model.<sup>66</sup> This rejection of intellectual discourses reflects the need to abstain from intellectual inquiry in the service of perpetuating the classical realist agenda. Too much room for inquiry could destabilize the incoherent base of the movement.

The most recent iteration of the *Florence Academy*, founded in 1991, can find common ground with its 16<sup>th</sup> century predecessor in the encouragement of a stylistic consistency among pupils. Indeed, *The Accademia del Disegno* in Florence, though lacking consistent implementation of curriculum and theory was still able to produce artists with extreme stylistic continuity. The same can be said for the student work coming out of the contemporary *Florence Academy* of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>67</sup> Both institutions foster a certain culture that facilitates the production of similar nudes with similar color palettes and even compositions. Often there is a stress on idealism or a lack of specificity and not copying nature too closely. In his *Seven Discourses on Art*, Sir Joshua Reynolds states: “For perfect beauty in any species must combine all the characters which are

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<sup>66</sup> That said, Carl Goldstein has pointed out the distinction between theory and practice. He observed how the academy in Florence did not implement liberal arts education even though it held it in such high esteem. Goldstein sheds light on the first of many paradoxes to come in art education: “It is difficult to understand how the academy could have refused to teach subjects the importance of which these writers so persuasively argued: the more enduring paradox is that these arguments were put forward by the very leaders of the academy” (25). So, as we attempt to reconstruct the past philosophies of the first academy, we must do so with a grain of salt and understand that what academicians said and what they did were not always synonymous. In fact, according to Goldstein, “The early Florentine academy would seem, then, to have been an ‘academy’ principally in name, neither offering comprehensive drawing instruction nor espousing a doctrine consisting of rules to be implemented by all its members alike.” Carl Goldstein, *Teaching Art*, 25.

<sup>67</sup> Carl Goldstein, *Teaching Art*, 28.

beautiful in that species. It cannot consist in any one to the exclusion of the rest: no one, therefore, must be predominant, that no one may be deficient.”<sup>68</sup> Reynolds’ conception of the nude still holds sway over a number of the figure paintings produced at contemporary ateliers and by classical realist painters in general. Rather than critiquing the idealism of the nude, many classical realists wish to return to a time when the idealism of the nude was the standard.

Traditional academies prioritized drawing at the center of the curriculum and they often focused on drawing from live figure models. The emphasis on the figure traces back to the Carracci academy.<sup>69</sup> Though many contemporary universities continue to have life drawing classes, few of these classes uphold the academic approach to drawing seen in contemporary atelier programs. Furthermore, ateliers often offer multiple levels of figure drawing, and specific courses focusing on anatomy and portraiture that one cannot find in a contemporary university. So, in this respect, ateliers follow closely in the footsteps of academies by incorporating deep drawing investigations.

### **The Role of Imitation in Academies**

The role of copying and imitation is also important to point out here, especially since this essay is concerned with the use of pastiche on the part of classical realists. 21<sup>st</sup> century Ateliers, like their traditional counterparts, locate creativity and development of originality in the act of copying. They view imitation as a necessary building block to freedom of expression that will come later. In his speech at *The Representational Art*

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<sup>68</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art*, 47.

<sup>69</sup> Carl Goldstein, *Teaching Art*, 36

*Conference*, Frederick C. Ross pointed to the necessity of studying lessons of the past. He states “Only someone who has learned what is already known can strive to create fearlessly and will have any chance of actually creating something new.” Ross, and other supporters of classical realism defend their project of classical education because they believe it fosters the true development of creativity. In his text *Mimesis*, Matthew Potolsky noted that academies often used imitation as a means of training including the practice of drawing from plaster casts and statues.<sup>70</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds also argued that the more artists pay attention to the past, the more they can create original works of art: “The more extensive therefore your acquaintance is with the works of those who have excelled the more extensive will be your powers of intention; and what may appear still more like a paradox, the more original will be your conceptions.”<sup>71</sup> According to Reynolds, rules only serve to aid genius art production: “Every opportunity, therefore, should be taken to discountenance that false and vulgar opinion that rules are the fetters of genius. They are fetters only to men of no genius; as that armour, which upon the strong becomes an ornament and a defense, upon the weak and misshapen turns into a load, and cripples the body which it was made to protect.”<sup>72</sup> Reynolds also believed students of art should complete paintings similar to master works and then bring them into the museum to compare them side-by-side.<sup>73</sup> Both traditional academies and contemporary ateliers see the copy as a source of inspiration and originality instead of a hindrance to artistic development. Though, as mentioned earlier, modernist and post-

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<sup>70</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 68.

<sup>71</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art*, 31.

<sup>72</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art*, 21.

<sup>73</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art*, 34.



modernist painters may also delve into the use of a copy, but they are less transparent about this process and may even intentionally conceal the role of copying in their work through discourses of originality. This positive attitude towards copying past mimetic representational styles in the educational institutions that produce classical realists leads to the creation of art subjects and artworks that embody a pastiche in the form of classical realist painting.

### **Universality and Timelessness in Atelier Philosophy**

Another parallel one can draw between contemporary atelier programs and traditional academies is their shared belief in universal and timeless qualities in art. This concept also furthers the role of pastiche through the celebration of copying “timeless” qualities in artworks to achieve an ideal painting. Contemporary classical realist painter Jacob Collins argues that there is no point in making art with explicit reference to our time period. Other ateliers boast of time-tested skills and techniques that stand the test of generations. The traditional academies upheld Renaissance traditions from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. In his series of lectures given to *The Royal Academy*, Sir Joshua Reynolds states:

I would chiefly recommend that an implicit obedience to the rules of art, as established by the great masters, should be exacted from the young students. That those models, which have passed through the approbation of ages, should be considered by them as perfect and infallible guides as subject for their imitation, not their criticism.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art*, 21.

Contemporary atelier programs continue to uphold these traditions by looking back towards the traditional academies. Like their predecessors, contemporary atelier programs boast about their role in maintaining time honored traditions and values that they believe will continue into the future. In his second of *Seven Discourses on Art*, Sir Joshua Reynolds refers to the importance of timeless traits in art that can stand the test of centuries and do not limit themselves to modern trends:

The works of those who have stood the test of ages have a claim to that respect and veneration to which no modern can pretend. The duration and stability of their fame is sufficient to evince that it has not been suspended upon the slender thread of fashion and caprice, but bound to the human heart by every tie of sympathetic approbation.<sup>75</sup>

Throughout his discourses he repeatedly calls attention to the deceptive nature of cheap and short-lived artistic tricks and trends. He pushes his pupils to avoid the easy route of flashy modern devices in favor of time-tested approaches that offer real and measurable results. He claims that there are no shortcuts to being an artist and only diligence and hard work will allow an artist to achieve such a status. This notion of the timeless contributes to the 21<sup>st</sup> century atelier's general avoidance of social or political issues. It is evident in Frederick Ross's lectures and Jacob Collins' interview that there is an extreme anti-intellectual sentiment at the heart of the classical realist movement. As addressed earlier, few atelier programs offer liberal arts coursework. If they do offer a liberal arts curriculum, it reinforces the idea of art history as a history of masterpieces. For example, *Golden Gate Atelier*, founded in 2011, describes their art history program in the following terms:

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<sup>75</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art*, 32.

Art history lectures focus on the masters of classical painting from Titian and Rembrandt to Degas and Sargent. We explore their techniques, ideas, and approaches to the art of oil painting. How does an artist use line, value, color, brush-work, narrative, and symbolism? What images or techniques did he learn from his teacher or other masters? How did his style and subject matter develop? What is the relationship of form and content in his work?<sup>76</sup>

Nowhere in this description is there a critical discussion of these artists. Rather, they are examined as models for further learning and development. The means and the goals of art are wrongly conflated. This kind of art history is similar to the model of investigative art theory upheld by academic intellectuals of the past like Sir Joshua Reynolds. The use of theory is in examination of the formal and conceptual elements that made these works so wonderful. Theory is never used as an instrument to question the validity of the project a given master from the past upheld. The description of the Humanities program at *Golden Gate Atelier* also has a strong Western emphasis. Though contemporary society is included in the discussion, it continues a line of questioning focused on the tradition of western masters:

The Golden Gate Atelier humanities program is a survey of Western culture as it applies to visual artists. We'll begin in the first trimester with the classical Greek world and its influence. In the second trimester we'll study the core of the canon: the Bible, Dante, Shakespeare, Leonardo, Bach, and Beethoven. Finally, we'll try to understand the modern world and the ideas that have shaped us: the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernism, and contemporary society with its globalization and multiple belief systems. We'll explore all these works in seminars using the Socratic method of shared-inquiry discussion. Throughout, we'll connect our reading to our daily struggles as painters. What themes resonate in the world today?<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> "Art History." *Golden Gate Atelier*, n.d. <http://www.goldengateatelier.com/programs/art-history-humanities>.

(Retrieved April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

This program is one of the few programs that even offer a model of theory or art history and it has clear leanings towards upholding the traditions of masterworks. It does encourage some reflection on contemporary society and the role that art might play in commenting on societal issues, but this is all in the context of a notion that there is a clear canon of masterworks that can serve as models for the “correct” way of handling paintings and compositions.

Another educational institution associated with the classical realist movement that incorporates the discussion of theory is *The Hudson River Fellowship*. Jacob Collins’ school *The Grand Central Atelier* in New York offers this fellowship for students interested in carrying on the American tradition of the Hudson River school. Students who receive this fellowship follow a strict progression from pencil drawings, to tonal studies, to plein air sketches. Before they move on to completing their studio painting, they have to come to terms with the relevant “Theory” associated with landscape painting. The description of this set of the curriculum is as follows:

Each year, the Fellowship hosts lectures and discussions covering the more academic aspects of landscape painting. These will engage art history, science, and the methods and materials of the classical landscape painters.

Past Lecture Topics - Botany; Cole and Church; Geology; History and Influences of the Hudson River School; Techniques: How Did They Do It?; Perspective: Graphical and Atmospheric; Plein Air Sketches: Claude to Cole; Meteorology and Cloud Studies; Why is the Sky Blue?<sup>78</sup>

This is nowhere near the type of theoretical inquiry painters delve into in the context of university art programs today. This theory is a hodge-podge of information from design,

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<sup>78</sup> Jacob Collins. “Hudson River Fellowship: Mission.” *Grand Central Atelier*, n.d. <http://grandcentralatelier.org/hudson-river-fellowship.php>. (Retrieved April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017).

western art history and science that operates in support of the project of *The Hudson River School*. These artists are self-aware only to the extent that they can create luxurious and beautiful landscape paintings that carry on the tradition of *The Hudson River School*. There is no room here to question the nationalist rhetoric behind the tradition of American Landscape painting. And, in some ways that makes sense since these students mimic the style and technique of *The Hudson River School*, without the initial nationalist rhetoric or historical intentions. Theirs is a pastiche of the original Hudson River School. If they allowed for a deep intellectual inquiry they may become aware of how their paintings mimicked a style rooted in manifest destiny and westward expansion. That would be too uncomfortable, and too distracting from the need to paint beautiful and representational landscapes.

Carl Goldstein notes that this way of thinking contributes to a broader sense that there is no need to question the social function of art. He describes this paradigm as the “story of timelessly beautiful works of art created by a few “immortals” whose achievement defies historical explanation.”<sup>79</sup> The notion of timelessness relates to the social function of art as classical realists see it. By resurrecting the notion of the masterpiece, they also find themselves avoiding the use of art as a means of critiquing the history of art or as an angle through which one might examine society. Because the art emphasizes mastery and timelessness, it seeks to transcend any social and political parameters that might restrict it. This concept is very important to grasp when considering the tendency toward conservatism and the general anti-intellectual attitude

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<sup>79</sup> Carl Goldstein, *Teaching Art*, 202.

typical of this movement. It is connected to the need to uphold masterworks and to avoid questioning them. Goldstein further clarifies this point by writing, “So conceived, art transcends not only history but culture; it is a matter of beauty and not of function or meaning. Questions of its role in society, of who or what purpose it served, are therefore redundant.”<sup>80</sup> According to this logic, there is no point in describing the function of the nude in society since it contains a transcendent quality inherent in great art. There is no need to push artists toward a critique of the history of art, since that history, at least before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, catalogues a series of masterful genius painters. Though there is no doubt that there are artists attached to this movement with conservative social and political agendas, I argue that the origin of this agenda is aesthetic and formal. This provides the interesting conundrum that a number of artists involved in this movement are politically and socially liberal yet aesthetically conservative.

### **Greenberg, Bourdieu, and the Lowly Status of Classical Realists**

Though one can logically conclude that there are a number of crucial similarities between a traditional academic curriculum of the past and the current atelier curriculum, these institutions are remarkably different in social status. While traditional academies held sway over art production and had a monopoly over fine art education and exhibition opportunities during their rein, contemporary ateliers exist on the periphery of the art educational apparatus. Although these programs have ever growing strength in numbers, they have yet to establish key critical recognition or significance. They reflect the

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<sup>80</sup> Carl Goldstein, *Teaching Art*, 202.

accumulated baggage attached to the academic tradition. The Universities in America are the institutions that now lay claim to the highest rung of status. Ateliers are so far down on the hierarchy of art education that few University professors are even aware of their existence. In his essay “Fear and Loathing of the Academic”, Paul Barlow noted that there is no equivalent disdain for the academic project music and literature: “While critical commentary on music during the nineteenth-century identifies Brahms as a conservative figure and Wagner as a radical, Brahms’s conservatism has not consigned him to the status ‘Academic composer’, conferring critical contempt on him and his work.”<sup>81</sup> It is evident in the work of Paul Barlow and other contributors to the text *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century*, that there is an undue level of bias waged against academic art in general that continues to sway our perceptions of paintings and painters from this time period.

The academic tradition has faced a long history of criticism that contributes to the unrecognized status of contemporary atelier programs. After the development of the avant-garde and the push towards modern art in the later portion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Academies lost their high artistic and social status. In 1939 Clement Greenberg further cemented the deplorable status of academic art when he connected it with kitsch. Greenberg defined kitsch as art made in opposition to the goals and aims of the noble Avant-Garde in his essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” Greenberg explains the relationship between Avant-Garde and Kitsch in the following quotations:

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<sup>81</sup> Barlow, Peter. “Fear and Loathing of the Academic, or Just What Is It That Makes the Avant-Garde so Different, so Appealing?” In *Art and The Academy In the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 25.

Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-guard. True enough—simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the German give the wonderful name of *Kitsch*: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc<sup>82</sup>

Greenberg does not believe that populist art is inherently positive and argues that in order to overcome our base susceptibility to the manipulations of kitsch art, we must learn to appreciate work by the avant-garde that will not offer itself up so easily to the spectator. Greenberg defines academic art as an example of kitsch: “Self-evidently, all kitsch is academic; and conversely, all that’s academic is kitsch. For what is called the academic as such no longer has an independent existence, but has become the stuffed-shirt “front” for kitsch”<sup>83</sup> Post-modern artists reclaimed kitsch in a turn that frustrated Greenberg. Without being aware of it, these classical realists similarly reclaim kitsch in a positive interpretation.

In this essay we also see Greenberg foreshadowing later claims by social theorist Pierre Bourdieu about the necessity of education to appreciate certain kinds of art. Greenberg believes that kitsch—"art" for the masses—appeals because it is quick, simple and easy to read. Greenberg’s association between mimetic representation and kitsch has contributed to greater issues of accepting mimetic representation and figurative painting that continue to plague debates about the role of representational painting in the contemporary art world. Greenberg states that, “the peasant soon finds that the necessity of working hard all day for his living and the rude, uncomfortable circumstances in which

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<sup>82</sup> Clement Greenberg “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” *Partisan Review*, (1939), 9.

<sup>83</sup> Clement Greenberg “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” 11.



he lives do not allow him enough leisure, energy and comfort to train for the enjoyment of Picasso.”<sup>84</sup> He points out that in order to appreciate modern art, one needs an education. Peasants, who do not have time to learn about the true nature of art will fall prey to the seductive powers of kitsch. Greenberg states, “In the end the peasant will go back to kitsch when he feels like looking at a picture, for he can enjoy kitsch without effort.”<sup>85</sup> Though this essay meant to break artistic hierarchies in order to make room for appreciating the avant-garde, it also established a new hierarchy with academic art at the bottom. And, though Greenberg has sympathy for the plight of the peasant class, he constructs an equation between academic art and philistinism. The cultural elite now embraces the avant-garde over academic art in order to avoid associations with anyone who would like kitsch. The avant-garde provides a higher level of status for the cultural elite after Greenberg’s essay.

But, one might ask, haven’t high and low merged in our postmodern art world? How can one begin to draw a distinction between the two? The high and low may have blurred but they have not merged. James Elkins observes that the distinctions between high art and low art still remain intact.

Modern and postmodern artists have traditionally *taken* from low art and put bourgeois objects to avant-garde use. (Jeff Koons, for example, got some notoriety for recycling bourgeois porcelain figures as high art; in the same fashion Max Ernst had recycled popular magazine illustrations as high art collages.) But that’s different from believing that decoration and fine art have the same value.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Clement Greenberg “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” 45.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Elkins, *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 84.

Elkins points to key issues in delineating distinctions between high and low art and the general disdain for art deemed too bourgeois, decorative, or out of touch with the avant-garde. When an artist incorporates objects associated with decoration, kitsch, or popular culture, hierarchical distinctions do not disappear. There is a targeted and direct use of these codes from lower culture that contribute to the further delineation and sanctity of high art spaces through the deployment of avant-garde concepts.

Given the hostility of the contemporary art world to certain forms of academic kitsch, it is no surprise that classical realists have developed separate schools and organizations. As mentioned earlier, contemporary artists like Jeff Koons, Lisa Yuskavage, and John Currin all engage in an ironic form of Kitsch that allows their work to sit comfortably within the trends of the postmodern art world. The classical realists, who engage in a sincere form of Kitsch do not have access to these rungs of power and prestige. Having a peer group and community of artists that can validate and support a project is important to the development of artistic subjects. For Bourdieu, in fact, the artist's peer community shapes the very production of the work itself: "Few people depend as much as artists and intellectuals do for their self-image upon the image others, and particularly other writers and artists have of them."<sup>87</sup> Classical realists, facing larger rejection from the art market, developed their own organizations and communities with a different set of legitimizing standards. As Bourdieu has observed, symbolic goods with limited production need legitimizing bodies to grow and develop: "These agents of consecration, moreover, may be organizations which are not fully institutionalized:

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<sup>87</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 116.

literary circles, critical circles, salons, and small groups surrounding a famous author or associating with a publisher, a review or a literary or artistic magazine.”<sup>88</sup> This explains the role of contemporary atelier programs and organizations like *The Art Renewal Center* since they provide both communities and the service of a legitimizing body for a marginalized group engaged in the process of limited production of symbolic goods.

Bourdieu also observes how issues of taste manifest themselves in art production and reception. In his text *Distinction*, originally published in 1979, he observes: “To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of ‘class.’”<sup>89</sup> Here Bourdieu offers a hierarchical connection between art commodities and consumers of those commodities. The hierarchy of the art market extends to both subjects and objects and one’s personal taste in art reflects a given subject’s position within this hierarchy. Artists in contemporary ateliers practice a conservative model of art production that is now both devalued and marginalized. So, although they promote a classical, traditional, and even aristocratic aesthetic, these ateliers also fall into the category of low-brow art.

The role of the conceptual models of art education that dominate the model of contemporary University art education is interesting in consideration of both Bourdieu’s theories about works of restricted art production and Clement Greenberg’s push to

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

<sup>89</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University), 2.

associate academic art with kitsch. Bourdieu observes that the set of knowledge necessary to understand and appreciate works of art operates on a limited basis. He states:

... works of restricted art owe their specifically cultural rarity and thus their function as elements of social distinction, to the rarity of the instruments with which they may be deciphered. This rarity is a function of the unequal distribution of the conditions underlying the acquisition of the specifically aesthetic disposition of the codes indispensable to the deciphering of works belonging to the field of restricted production.<sup>90</sup>

Restrictions function in both the art object and the ability to understand the art object.

This produces rarity, hierarchy and exclusion. Now, rather than cultivating an appreciation for skill, composition, or technique, the new intellectual rarity is appreciating the conceptual foundations of post-modern art. One rare skill set has taken over another.

Part of the reason ateliers remain off the radar of university art departments is because they resurrect an emphasis on skill and technique that university art departments have struggled to expunge from their curriculum. And, as mentioned earlier, this has historical roots in the early academies that also wanted to distance themselves from craft.

In his book *Art Subjects*, Howard Singerman observes that there is a need for the university itself to separate from what it deems to be lower models of art education.

Singerman writes:

Among the tasks of the university program in art is to separate its artists and the art world in which they operate from “amateurs” grounded in manual skill, tortured genius, or recreational pleasure. Moreover, art in the university must constitute itself as a department and a discipline, separate from public “lay” practices and equal to other studies on campus.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 120.

<sup>91</sup> Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects*, 6.

Through the lens of the university system, skill is connected with amateurism. The university art curriculum must, by necessity, pull away from the educational model present in contemporary atelier programs, which continue to promote manual skill. Singerman is clear: the need to eliminate skill based training from art education stems from more than just the shift to expressive and conceptual models. It is even more complicated than simply the devaluation of skill. It is rooted in the need to establish art as its own discipline within the context of a university system. This problem translates itself to private post-secondary art schools since so many university art programs also lead the way in establishing curricular criteria for other programs. Singerman writes, “On campus, art cannot be a calling or a vocation. To be included among the disciplines, art must give up its definition as craft or technique, a fully trainable manual skill on the guild or apprenticeship model.”<sup>92</sup> So, because art needs to align itself with disciplines like History, English, and Anthropology, it cannot appear to be something that is vocational and skill oriented. It must be higher than the base level of manual dexterity or craft based training. This separation of professional artists from hobbyists or amateurs constructs the development of art subjects within the university.

The irony is clear. The traditional academic model instigated a distinction between purely manual skill and high art. These academies emphasized the role of theory and the importance of viewing the fine arts as discipline within the liberal arts. This academic precedence provided the foundation for later criticisms and attacks on representational practices for their skill-based roots. Just as the academies have pulled

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

away from the craft-based apprenticeships, the contemporary art schools pull away from skill based instruction. And, the role of theory that once supported the causes and concerns of artists like Sir Joshua Reynolds, now operates in a way to critique and undermine the project of academic painting. The contemporary atelier program as a model of art education carries on the tradition of the academies in its curriculum and philosophies, however it does not parallel the traditional academies in status and avoids the connection between art practice and intellectualism that the traditional academies valued. The contradiction between past academic models, which are highly intellectualized, and the present anti-intellectual atelier system, is another indication that Ross, Collins and other key figures in this movement are grasping academic impulses only at the level of style but not within basic historical and theoretical context. This further supports the conclusion that they provide a pastiche of academicism rather than a total revival of academicism. This raises the question: What is the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of the traditional Academy? A number of scholars including Carl Goldstein, Nicholas Houghton, James Elkins have made the point that the new academies are the university art departments. They are the new arbiters of power, status and prestige. Ateliers may look, act and talk like academies, but their heft and force remain marginal. Though they copy the styles of the academies, they are missing the ideas that were always at the heart of academies which was separating high art from manual skill. Their use of pastiche with an anti-intellectual agenda, keeps them from entering the upper echelons of the art world. This brings us to the next chapter, which will explore in more detail the model of contemporary art education and how the atelier operates as a response to contradictions

inherent in art education of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Now that we have established the qualities of the atelier program, it is necessary to understand the opposing narrative contained in contemporary university art departments and art colleges to which these ateliers respond.

### **Chapter III:**

#### **Ateliers as a Response to Contradictions in Contemporary Art Education**

When first encountering the Atelier system, it is tempting to label it as separatist and anachronistic. Indeed, there is cause for arguing they contain anachronistic qualities and philosophies: contemporary ateliers advertise their connection to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Adam Gopnik felt transported back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century when visiting Jacob Collins at *The Grand Central Atelier*. However anachronistic these institutions may be, too much fixation on their relation to the past will obscure the fact that these institutions operate in direct response to the present crisis in contemporary art education. Contemporary atelier programs do not exist in a vacuum. They mirror back the flaws, inadequacies, biases, contradictions, and internal conflicts inherent in the contemporary model of art education. These ateliers promote a blend of various historical representational styles and collapse categories in order to maintain an illusion of simplicity. In a complicated and confusing art world and art educational system, they ignore historical context and sandwich together impressionism, idealism, and realism in order to produce a simplified version of art that may appeal to students overwhelmed by the multitude of contradictory curriculum in contemporary art schools. Their form of pastiche conceals history and offers up an ahistorical alternative reality for art production to the contemporary art student. In order to understand why an art student today would opt for an atelier education, it is necessary to explore the conflicts inherent in contemporary models of art education.



## **Nicholas Houghton and Six Different Contradictory Models of Education**

In a recent article titled “Six into One: The Contradictory Art School Curriculum and how it Came About,” Nicholas Houghton traces the history of art education in the west and provides valuable insights into the conflicting elements of the typical college art curriculum.<sup>93</sup> His insights paint a picture of a contemporary art educational model that is flawed, biased, contradictory and confusing. He argues that there are six different curricula present in the contemporary art educational model and that the contradictions between these various curricula make for a very chaotic educational environment. Houghton separates the various developments in curriculum by using the following terms: Apprentice, Academic, Formalist, Expressive, Conceptual and Professional. Each college art program today reflects its own unique combination of all six models. Using Houghton as a framework, one can understand what ateliers offer that other schools seem to lack. In a very real way, these ateliers offer students a more consistent and less contradictory model of education. By focusing on the academic model of education, ateliers maintain a consistency in their philosophy. They offer a simplified curriculum that forces fewer contradictory models of education together than the contemporary university or private art college. In a time where the art world and the art educational system are confusing and contradictory, ateliers provide a simple and affordable solution for students interested in studying art.

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<sup>93</sup> Nicholas Houghton, *Six Into One*, 1.

## **The Apprentice Model**

Houghton begins by describing the apprentice model that served as the main art educational model during the middle-ages. In this model, students learned the skills of their trade from a master in the field. Houghton explains that we can still see the legacy of this model in contemporary art education, since students often study with mentors or masters in a particular medium. Even if that medium is installation art or digital video, students continue to seek the guidance of a contemporary master in their particular field or medium. Art schools and universities boast about the international reputation of their faculty for this very reason. Rather than absorbing technical skills, University art students study with a master in order to absorb an aura of fame and an intellectual framework. According to Houghton, the graduating thesis exhibition also stands in as a contemporary corollary to apprentices making “masterpieces” to demonstrate their ability to enter their trade. This model also plays an important role in atelier programs since they often emphasize the opportunity to study with “master painters.” Ateliers also offer individual instruction to their students where, step-by-step, students learn skills and techniques from a master painter. Though it dates back to the middle ages, the apprentice model still has weight in both contemporary University art programs and contemporary ateliers. The difference between the two is the varying kinds of information students seek from a particular master in their field.

## **The Academic Model**

Following this model Houghton describes the academies that originated in Italy during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Houghton points towards the emphasis on drawing from observation that structured the academic curriculum, and also explains the legacy of academic inquiries into the nature of art and philosophy. Houghton explains how art academies, though rooted in skill based training, distinguished their efforts from craft by incorporating theoretical dialogues and debates about art. This is important for several reasons. First, as outlined in the first chapter, the atelier model of education that exists today rarely includes this level of intellectual rigor. Ateliers model their training only after a component of the academic model, which is the craft of drawing and painting. They tend to circumvent philosophical discussions or debates about the nature of art. Second, contemporary art programs, which often disdain academic art, owe their legacy of intellectual thought to the development of academies. Third, many contemporary art schools continue to offer academic based curriculum in the form of drawing from observation and figure drawing courses with live nude models. Though they may draw from models in more experimental ways, they are still integrating a component of the academic curriculum. The old academy is now split across two very different institutions. Part of its craft legacy continues to thrive in contemporary atelier programs and part of its intellectual legacy structures the role of theoretical inquiry in contemporary university art programs. Though the contemporary university may want to separate itself from the entire project of academic art, it is quite implicated in the legacy of this educational model.

## **The Formalist Model**

Houghton goes on to describe the formalist model of education that followed the academic model. He explains how art schools remained academic well after the development of modern art, and did not incorporate formalism into their curriculum until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. This reiterates James Elkins' argument that institutions often lag behind the issues and concerns of the larger art world. Houghton explains that two separate branches of modern art wormed their way into the framework of art education: formalist and expressive. He traces the formalist model of art education to the Bauhaus school and geometric abstraction. The Bauhaus school had its own internal contradictions. Founded in 1919 by Walter Gropius, this institution merged a fine arts academy with an applied arts academy. Carl Goldstein noted that the school never fully acknowledged its status as a school of Modern fine art. And, in spite of claiming to view craft and fine art traditions equally, the Bauhaus school delegated female instructors for the craft based arts of weaving and consistently devalued their contributions. This formalist model rooted in Bauhaus education continues to hold weight in contemporary art programs in the form of foundation studio courses in design and color theory. Any student who has burnt the midnight oil making geometric gouache color studies has been working within the formalist model of education. Instead of fully supplanting the academic model the formalist model just became another layer of curriculum. So following the mid twentieth century, students learned how to draw from observation and to utilize formalist geometric abstraction.

It is often assumed that the nature of strict modern art institutions like the Bauhaus somehow stand apart from traditional academics, but this is not the case. Nicholas Houghton describes the parallels between formalist education and traditional academic curriculum. He explains that they both believe in universals, and that both use a form of geometry (perspective in the case of the academies, and geometric abstraction in the case of the formalist model). Houghton observes that these two camps, which may prefer to keep a harsh and delineated line between each other, in fact promote similar values. They share a number of concerns, including a notable level of sincerity. Considering the general lack of sincerity and common use of parody and irony in post-modern art, it is interesting to note the almost awkward degree of sincerity present in both of these educational models. While classical realist organizations like *The Art Renewal Center* make vocal attacks against the project of modernism, they ignore the commonalities between select modernism(s) and academic art. And, proponents of pure modernism also ignore their parallel belief in universal systems of thought.

### **The Expressive Model**

The other branch of modernism that guides art school curriculum according to Houghton is “Expressive.” This model stems from modern art practices that utilize techniques of improvisation, spontaneity and free-association. If Joseph Albers’ intricate colors studies model the formalist ideal, Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings embody the expressionist ideal. Using a variety of materials and techniques, students learn to express themselves in their work. This continues to hold sway even in deeply conceptual

programs like CalArts. During an interview, President Lavine of CalArts explained, “We’re idealistic. We don’t prepare students to do jobs that already exist. Our mission is to help every student develop a voice of his or her own”<sup>94</sup> So, not only can students find curriculum rooted in apprentice and academic models in contemporary University Art schools, they can also find both formalist and expressive models of education.

Unlike the more skill oriented academic and formalist models, the expressive model fixated on some sort of integral component of personal expression a student could bring to the work. This marker of creative genius and potential is nearly impossible to teach because it is not a skill. Nicholas Houghton observes that proponents of this expressive model saw skill based instruction as potentially harmful since it may constrict or impede the creative abilities of an individual.<sup>95</sup> This philosophy differs starkly from ateliers. Ateliers support the notion that the more skill a student has the more potential that student has to create. Far from being restrictive, proponents of technical art instruction believe skill supports and promotes a conscious level of creativity. On the other hand, the expressive model introduces a notion into art education that embraces the individual. This notion may seem more inclusive, yet in some ways it is far less inclusive than the atelier model.

By privileging individual expression and reducing art production to an indefinable “x” factor, the expressive model positions the natural genius of a young student as the key indicator of potential rather than the student’s potential ability to acquire skills and learn. By defining art as “un-teachable”, instructors imply that there is something natural,

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<sup>94</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 59.

<sup>95</sup> Nicholas Houghton, *Six into One*, 112.

innate or even biologically already present in each student that will either be conducive to art production or will inhibit it. There is a clear cost to locating the process of teaching art outside of the teachable realm. Nicholas Houghton observed this in his description of the expressive model of education. The expressive model had roots in the child art movement, which contended that the expressive potential of each student mattered. The expressive model in higher education on the other hand, reserves expression only for those who have the “talent” necessary to express something of interest.<sup>96</sup> This paper will address this issue later within the context of contradictory art admissions processes in the contemporary art school.

### **The Conceptual Model**

The most significant shift in art education according to Houghton, and the most important to consider for the existence of atelier programs, is the conceptual shift of the 1970s. Rather than emphasize skill, craft, material, or expression, this model privileges the concept of the work of art above all else. Houghton explains that in the conceptual model, the importance of the art object is tied to its conceptual relevance to art or contemporary political and social issues. With this curriculum came a heavy dose of critical theory. In his text *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, James Elkins refers to the conceptual shift by explaining that, “Any first-year program that stresses ideology and politics over media and skills is certainly post-Bauhaus.”<sup>97</sup> This post-Bauhaus conceptual curriculum incorporates an even wider variety of materials and media than the Bauhaus

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<sup>96</sup> Nicholas Houghton, *Six into One*, 112.

<sup>97</sup> James Elkins, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, 39.

and expressive curricula and emphasized. Now students can work with film, photography, installation, performance art, text, and sound.

According to Houghton, this model paved the way for PhD degrees in studio art because of its emphasis on critical theory. Houghton describes this phenomenon by writing, “In the connoisseur’s place came the critical theorist, who also possesses expert knowledge not readily available to everyone: in this case understanding of dense and difficult texts by a range of influential authors, mainly from Germany and France (Lacan and Derrida being particular favorites).”<sup>98</sup> With critical theory being ever more essential and necessary to understand, it made perfect sense to develop PhD programs in studio art. The conceptual model brought with it a new set of skills for students to learn. Howard Singerman also supports this assertion that language has usurped manual skill. He writes, “Whether the language of the university displaces technique—becomes the technique of a new art—or displaces art itself in the practice of criticism, I leave an open question.”<sup>99</sup> Indeed, this is a very open question, and there are any number of interpretations and manifestations of this issue in deskilling across art education. The written word began to supplant the physical process of making art. Houghton’s observation also reflects Clement Greenberg’s claims and Bourdieu’s theories about status, and the hierarchy of exclusive knowledge. He points out that an education is necessary to comprehend the critical theory backing conceptual art object production.

The “Down to the Wrist” model demonstrated at CalArts embodies the conceptual model of education. This phrase refers to educating artists in all aspects of theorizing and

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<sup>98</sup> Nicholas Houghton, *Six into One* 114.

<sup>99</sup> Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects*, 8.



considering art and rejecting instruction in manual skill or technique. Thornton writes, “It used to be said that some colleges instructed their students only ‘up to the wrist’ (in other words, they focused on craftsmanship) while CalArts educated its artist only ‘down to the wrist’ (its concentration on the cerebral was such that it neglected the fine art of the hand).”<sup>100</sup> Sarah Thornton interviewed Leslie Dick at CalArts and learned about the school motto: “No technique before need.” So, technique only comes into play so long as it may enhance a particular concept but cannot operate as a foundational knowledge base from which students can later draw inspiration. In its orientation away from skill, CalArts has particular disdain for the practice of painting. Thornton observes that “Nowadays at CalArts there are painters on staff but no ‘painting staff’ per se, and the school has developed a reputation for being inhospitable to practitioners of the medium.”<sup>101</sup> Thornton also notes the irony in this considering that some of the more famous graduates from CalArts include Eric Fischl and David Salle.<sup>102</sup>

This conceptual curriculum stands in direct contradiction to the values and philosophies of atelier programs and classical realist painters. The conceptual curriculum reflects the broader aims of conceptual art, which privilege the idea or concept over the medium. Rooted in skill, technique, and craft, atelier programs privilege the art object in a way that is much closer to the philosophies of formalist and expressive abstraction than it is to project of conceptual art. Furthermore, this conceptual curriculum eliminates specialization. Many art students see no point in pouring hours and hours into one

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<sup>100</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, 64

<sup>101</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, 64. The CalArts faculty directory for this year (2017) on their website reveals that this trend continues: <https://directory.calarts.edu/school-of-art/faculty>.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

particular skill when they may combine a variety of mediums and ideas together to produce a work of art. Students who enjoy drawing and painting will find themselves in a position where they have to offer up a conceptual defense for their inclination towards such a time intensive medium. They confront questions like: *Why bother making a painting when it would be more interesting and powerful as a digital video? Or, why learn any painting techniques when your naturally naïve form of expression offers a fascinating parallel to the conceptual critique imbedded in your work?* None of these questions return a student to the craft of painting, but rather offer strong arguments in favor of never learning how to use traditional oil painting techniques. Under the structure of this model, a student's time is better spent pouring over theoretical texts, and learning how to utilize digital media than it is learning how to draw. Even if a conceptual art institution does not embody an outright hostile environment to representational painting, which many do, it will still discourage this time intensive practice through logical deduction. It is very possible that representational painters who do not wish to support the project of classical realism, and want to make post-modern paintings, may find atelier programs a welcome relief from the constant nagging they receive in a university institution. Imagine if a music student had to explain over and over again why playing the violin was a valid use of their artistic energies. This is simply not a question one would think to ask a musician, but it is a question painters must be ready and willing to answer in today's art institutions.

## The Professional Model

The attempt to reconcile the demands of observational drawing skills with formalist abstraction and conceptualism are daunting to say the least. This is where most people would stop in their description of contradictory art education. How could it become more contradictory? However, Houghton pushes us to consider the most recent development in art education that adds the perfect mixture of confusion to the contemporary art school: *The Professional Model*. According to Houghton, after the apprentice, academic, formalist, expressive and conceptual, came the professional model during the 1990's in response to the increased role of marketing and emphasis on artistic genius in the arts. So, while students learn about theories from Lacan, Derrida, Judith Butler, and Foucault, they will also find themselves coached on the importance of exhibition design, curating, applying for grants, writing resumes, and self-promotion. And yet, in some ways, it dovetails nicely with conceptual curriculum. Houghton explains: "Because the post-Duchampian vista of contemporary art renders creative self-expression 'meaningless self-indulgence' (Josipovici 2010, 26), being an artist is no longer an inner need but a carefully calculated strategy."<sup>103</sup> So, self-aware art students can learn how to market their work to promote their conceptual strategies in a new art educational model. This deeply cynical approach to art production may explain some of the appeal of the atelier. Students who see their art as a meaningful form of self-expression would find support for that mode of thinking in an atelier program. Though,

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<sup>103</sup> Nicholas Houghton, *Six into One*, 115

they could only express themselves so much without delving into realms of abstraction unsuitable for the atelier model.

At the end of his essay Houghton summarizes the key issues in art education. First, there is no common core curriculum. Unlike other artistic disciplines, there are no core principles every visual artist must understand to make art. He explains that by incorporating drawing foundation coursework, a contemporary art school “often includes a core it does not believe in.” This lack of consistency in agreed upon foundations and the critique of those foundations leads to a conflict in goals of assessment. Houghton also explains that the current art school “encourages a Romantic adoption of an autonomous, artistic persona, but also stuffs students full of theory which contradicts this.” How is a student supposed to reconcile this contradiction? He also points to the contradiction of an institutionalized avant-garde within art schools. The new art school “has become the last resting place of an exhausted avant-garde, which, loaded with postmodern baggage, has turned into exactly what it once opposed: an academic discourse.” So the avant-garde that sought to destroy the academy, in a paradoxical turn of events, became the academy. Furthermore, according to Houghton, the new art school, “seems happily to accommodate students working in traditional media and processes such as painting, etching or modeling beside those who work in an array of new media- or none.” And, “It encourages students to learn how to market themselves, but with the risk that their quality of promotion will exceed the quality of the work they promote.”<sup>104</sup> After reading Houghton’s take on art

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<sup>104</sup> Nicholas Houghton, *Six into One*, 118.

education, one may wonder what is consistent about current art education? It may be that the only thing that is consistent is the lack of consistency.

### **Contradictions in Admissions Processes**

Part of the reason many artists and educators defend the current educational hodge-podge is that it offers an art education to a wide variety of students and is more egalitarian. But, this raises the question: Are contemporary art schools actually fair? Are they affordable? Do they really offer all students a way of rising to the top of the art hierarchy? Nicholas Houghton and Howard Singerman have both observed that regardless of the experimental nature of art curriculum, there are persisting biases in art education that continue to privilege some perspectives over others. Houghton writes,

Not only is the art school still biased towards men, but research in England by Burke and McManus (2009) shows that the art school is strongly biased towards those from privileged socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, and in my experience this has been the case in other countries. The professional curriculum is an illustration of how what is taught reinforces, rather than challenges, existing powers structures within the art world—and society.<sup>105</sup>

So, with the introduction of the most recent form of curriculum, the professional model, Houghton argues that existing hierarchies continue to persist. While one may accuse ateliers of upholding traditional models of white-patriarchal aesthetics, it is important to consider just what elements remain restrictive in the contemporary model of art education. What if minorities, women, and lower income students have more opportunities at cheaper and less exclusive ateliers than they do through the traditional art education that continues to privilege a white, upper-class perspective?

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<sup>105</sup> Nicholas Houghton, *Six into One*, 117.

Various spheres in the art world often claim to be separate from class conflict. Sarah Thornton observed the paradox of class privilege in art: “Although the art world is frequently characterized as a classless scene where artists from lower-middle-class backgrounds drink champagne with high-priced hedge-fund managers, scholarly curators, fashion designers, and other ‘creatives,’ you’d be mistaken if you thought this world was egalitarian or democratic. Art is about experimenting and ideas, but it is also about excellence and exclusion. In a society where everyone is looking for a little distinction, it’s an intoxicating combination.”<sup>106</sup> So, according to Thornton the art world uses a classless model to conceal what is in fact a very exclusive and hierarchical world. Could this be also happening in University Art Programs, and operating in University systems in general? Upholding claims of classless structures, how is it that some universities are in fact participating in the very forms of exclusion that their courses in gender studies and ethnic studies would abhor? Can we locate even more contradictions within the university system and what it stands for than the various conflicting curriculum by examining the potential gaps to entry that students face who do not “match” the notion of an ideal student?

This brings us to a recent study titled “Art for a Few” by Penny Jane Burk. In this study, Burk and her colleagues examined college admission policies in London. They looked at the admissions process and even sat in on interviews with various applicants. Burke observed that, “there is a general lack of clear information, advice and guidance available to candidates applying to art and design programmes which would facilitate the

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<sup>106</sup> Sara Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, xii.

discipline's complicated application process, particularly for those groups who do not have access to privileged forms of social and cultural capital."<sup>107</sup> The art school websites Burke studied obfuscated what a student needed to organize for an application. This goes beyond explaining the potential class barriers and explains another problem, which is the lack of preparedness 18-year old students face when making such a difficult decision. They are already unclear about what they will do as art students and the admissions information only works to further obscure what kind of contradictory curriculum lies ahead of them.

This study also explored the problems around the use of "potential" as an admissions requirement. Contemporary art schools, not seeking technical skill must turn to a vague definition of malleable potential. How this potential is defined is so broad and open that it leaves a great deal of room for personal judgment and interpretation on the part of admissions committees. Burk notes that the concept of "potential" "works to favour those attributes acquired through access to what are seen as valid and legitimate forms of cultural and social capital, for example knowledge of contemporary artists and designers and familiarity with certain galleries and exhibitions, thus exacerbating patterns of under-representation and exclusion."<sup>108</sup> So, when ateliers and the *Art Renewal Center* voice frustrations with the elitism of art schools, there is a legitimate basis for this argument both with regard to the admissions process and the interview process for art schools. The ateliers, which often offer classes and workshops open to the public, provide

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<sup>107</sup> Penny Jane Burk, "Art for a Few: Exclusion and Misrecognition in Art and Design Higher Education Admissions." (London: National Arts Learning Network, 2009), 7

<sup>108</sup> Penny Jane Burk, "Art for a Few," 7.

a more accessible form of art education than many public and private art educational institutions. Without clear standards, the default mode of acceptance for competitive art schools becomes the degree of cultural capital any given student can display.

When asked about the range of characteristics they are looking for in an ideal candidate, admissions tutors offered an array of conflicting and blurry traits. These include contradictory qualities. For example, schools look for students who are “on the edge of society” but the also value a student who is a “great team player” and “good at self-promotion.” Other conflicting traits include “unusual” and “has an easy journey into college.” Perhaps the best example is the “You know it when you see it.”<sup>109</sup> The education offered at art schools is contradictory, so it follows that they would be seeking candidates with contradictory qualities. In fact, the ideal candidate sounds like a person who has already had a contradictory education and emerged through all six of Nicholas Houghton’s models of education by the age of 18. The admissions process checks them for technical, conceptual, linguistic, and professional skills. So students need to have raw potential, but they also have to have a great deal figured out before applying. Given this daunting process, it is no wonder that there are smaller, simpler and more accessible schools opening up to offer a more straightforward model of education.

Another potential appeal of atelier programs is their price. They often offer certificates in place of four year degrees and as a result they provide an art education at a discounted rate. Students pay far less at atelier programs for workshops than they would at even public universities. The fact that these schools are able to circumvent the need for

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<sup>109</sup> Penny Jane Burk, “Art for a Few,” 24-25.



large administrative departments makes them able to offer their model of education at a reduced rate. The tuition fees for attending *The Grand Central Atelier* full time are \$10,500. This is on the higher end. Other schools may even offer lower tuition. That said, there are exceptions to this rule. Schools like LAAFA (Los Angeles Academy of Figurative Art), LCAD (Laguna College of Art and Design), and New York Academy of Art are private institutions that teach traditional skills while also granting bachelor and master degrees to art students. Though they are similar to ateliers in their traditional teaching methods, they have much higher tuition costs presumably as a result of administrative burdens.

### **The Consequences of Deskillling Art Education and the Appeal of Ateliers**

Another source of discontent students may find within the contemporary art educational system is the general lack of direct teaching. After the expressive model in education, many art teachers took enormous steps back from actually teaching in the aim of supporting an individual's creative potential. In the expressive model, less is quite literally more. Students may opt for atelier programs out of frustration with the fact that no one seems to be teaching them anything directly in a University art setting. A strong example of this is the critique format prevalent in many undergraduate and graduate art programs. Through the process of critiques, students discuss their work and the work of their peers in order to learn to think like artists, to speak like artists, and to defend their own work. While sitting in on Michael Asher's crit at CalArts, Sarah Thornton described the long process of guiding a young artist to the direction of creating a work of art.

Though Michael Asher's class is extreme (he is famous for 24 hour long critiques), it serves as an example of the meandering nature of critiques and the reluctance to address the specific needs of an individual art object that can so often happen within this educational setting. Asher sits back while the students do most of the talking, and even their talking does not address the work of art in a solid way. Sara Thornton offers a description of the critique: "Twelve forty-five P.M. The crit class discussion has been meandering for over two hours. About half the students have spoken, but Asher hasn't said a word, and no one has discussed Josh's drawings directly."<sup>110</sup> The nature of the critique in the contemporary art school setting swirls around the work without addressing the work itself. The works become phenomenological whipping posts for the students and the faculty involved. Imagine the frustration a student might feel during this process. They have spent potentially hundreds of hours making a selection of art objects only to wade into a situation where they will not get direct feedback, but rather will have to sort through the biases, opinions, and pontifications of various members of their cohort. Then, they must return to their studio and continue to make art. Many disgruntled students seeing fault with this process of education turn to the more traditional and conservative structure of ateliers. Ateliers are still contradictory, but they conceal these contradictions by focusing on skill and stylistic mimicry rather than intellectual inquiry. So, what they offer to confused contemporary art students appears more straightforward and simple.

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<sup>110</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, 51.

Howard Singerman began his book *Art Subjects* by addressing this very issue of melancholy plaguing some students in contemporary art education. Singerman states: “Although I hold a Master of Fine Arts degree in sculpture, I do not have the traditional skills of the sculptor; I cannot carve or cast or weld or model in clay. I think the question that I began this book to answer is, why not?”<sup>111</sup> Without the emphasis on materials, craft, and technique and with an increased emphasis on critical theory, conceptualism and self-awareness, some may decide to pursue a course of study that entirely expels the need to engage with or make objects in a direct sense. However, what comes across in Singerman’s writing is not so much an intentional and self-aware shift, but rather a recognition that at some point along the way he lost touch with his particular medium and his desire to be an artist. He remembers that he could have learned certain skills, but that there were no incentives in place for him to do so. His specific language is important here:

The question I posed to my teachers, and that they posed to me again and again, was not how to sculpt or to paint, but what to do as an artist, and as “my work.” Perhaps this is where my program failed me—after all, I am not an artist; at the time, however, I imagined that its failure lay in its outmoded map of recent art and its issues, in its parochial roster of gallery exhibitions and visiting artists. I am still not sure why, but at some point not long after graduation it became very difficult to imagine myself as an artist, or to be convinced by what I made.<sup>112</sup>

Singerman’s tone is disillusioned as he describes how his conversations with his professors did not revolve around how to make something but more around why to make something. He struggles both with seeing himself as an artist and believing in his own work. Singerman felt out of touch with the process of making art. This is just one of

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<sup>111</sup> Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects*, 4.

<sup>112</sup> Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects*, 4.

multiple consequences of deskilling in art education. He elaborates on this issue later by noting the rude awakening many art students feel when entering school:

Whatever has called a student to enter the department—the love of past art, and excitement about the process of creation, a desire for personal growth, the ability to draw—one of the primary lessons of the graduate program is that art can no longer be seen as a response to, or merely repository of, those needs and excitements.<sup>113</sup>

Students passionate about the act of drawing or painting will not find this excitement encouraged in many U.S. art institutions. Singerman is pointing to another version of this dilemma, which settle on two very different pedagogical approaches. Could it be that by removing the “how” from the equation of art instruction and replacing it with “why” forces many once passionate or excited artists to give up on their careers as artists? Is it a difficult headspace to always think about “why” you make work? And, does the question of “why” become a barrier in its own right that leads many artists to decide to not make anything at all? Is it also possible that the question of “how” offers forward thinking and optimistic solutions to the difficult and perplexing issues that plague the process of making art?

Through this lens, the atelier emphasizes the “how” question over the “why” question of art production. The atelier model breaks down curriculum into digestible instructional steps. Students follow a technical program and rarely get bogged down by asking *why* they paint. Instead, they focus on *how* to mix skin tones, *how* to draw a figure in proportion, *how* to build up layers of paint, *how* to use different kinds of brush strokes,

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<sup>113</sup> Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects*, 6.

and *how* to paint soft shadows across a model's cheek. In ateliers students receive more direct personal instruction while working from life, and can follow their passion to paint in blissful ignorance of the concerns of the larger art world. Because there are clear standards, there are obvious things to say or to point out to "improve" the work. So, a student working from a model would get feedback about how their proportions are off, the particular nuances of the anatomy in the shoulder may need work, or they can consider the color relationships between the light mass and shadow mass of the image. Students can quickly see how they are learning something and moving in a particular direction. They are not changing everything, but instead they are learning and building in their critiques. The feedback these students get is quick, personal, and it directly relates to the art object in question. Though strict, and potentially limiting for artists, students know they will learn about particular methods of drawing and painting from observation. It is not so difficult to imagine why this method of instruction has a certain appeal, especially for art students who want to acquire a skill set in drawing and painting.

Another potential advantage of a skill-based art education is that it focuses the learning environment on teachable concepts and acquirable skills. It is easy for non-artists to assume that expert drawing skills are based on talent and innate ability, yet this is far from the case. In his book, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, James Elkins observes that drawing is a very teachable skill. The many thousands of drawings we can see from Baroque academies according to Elkins, "show that basically anyone can learn to draw a figure with reasonably correct proportions. A proportionally correct drawing is not really

a matter of skill, and only marginally a question of training.”<sup>114</sup> In my own experience as an instructor at both a specialized art school and a community college, I have also found most students fully capable of developing observational drawing skills to a high level of proficiency. So, the ability to copy a cast, or the ability to draw from a live model, or paint from observation is not so much an innate talent as an acquired skill. Certainly there are some students who can learn the skill more quickly than others, but it remains very straightforward to teach someone how to draw or paint. It is ironic that what was judged to be a prohibitive standard for artists to achieve is in some ways easier to attain than the contradictory knowledge necessary to navigate the contemporary art world.

Another issue some students may take with contemporary educational models is the emphasis on change for the sake of change. Students attending atelier programs will undergo a particular process of change in attitudes and abilities as they draw from observation and develop keener perceptions. The change they undergo is gradual and involves the slow and steady development of new skills and techniques. Their education will not force them to question fundamental structures of society or the very definition of art. Students in University art programs will also undergo change. Yet, a great deal of the impetus for this change is in the context of questioning rather than building on a set of cumulative skills and knowledge. A high degree of questioning takes place in the context of graduate programs like the MFA program at CalArts. In an interview with Sarah Thornton, Leslie Dick describes the purpose of attending an MFA program in a metaphor similar to that of a rising phoenix: “Why come to grad school? It’s about paying a lot of

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<sup>114</sup> James Elkins, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, 20.

money so you can change. Whatever you thought was certain about how to make art is dismantled. You wobble. You don't make any sense at all. That's why you are here."<sup>115</sup>

The very purpose of the contemporary MFA program is to question, to doubt, and to dismantle any previous notions a particular student had when entering the program. Even if a student is already making interesting, thought provoking, and original art, said student will encounter criticism that questions every component of that art. James Elkins has a witty take on this conundrum by constructing a fake critique of Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*.<sup>116</sup> Elkins imagines that in a critique scenario faculty would be dumfounded by why the artist would have spent so much time on one image and would push him to "loosen up" his painting technique and to stop being so rigid. Elkin's thought experiment shows how there is an impetuosity to change something in an educational environment even if it is a master work. At a certain point, the contemporary MFA program encourages change for the sake of change and may not encourage a method of education that fosters growth and connection to the process of making art.

Numerous scholars, including Howard Singerman, James Elkins, Carl Goldstein, and Sarah Thornton have written about the contradictions present in various art schools. According to Singerman, the larger art world and art educational system is well aware of these contradictions and it is calling for an adjustment to the current model of education. Singerman writes that: "essays in the *College Art Journal* or *Arts in Society*, and in the mission statements of the new art departments, the debates over art and artist in the

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<sup>115</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, 50.

<sup>116</sup> James Elkins, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, 74-75.

university and the calls for reappraisal and reform bear witness to a set of unresolved contradictions”<sup>117</sup> There is no consistent answer to the following questions: *What should an artist learn? What skills are necessary to be an artist? What role should skill play in the development of the artist? How much critical theory should an artist study? What role should professional development play in all of this? How can one institution reconcile six different models of art education and produce sane art subjects? What components of art are in fact teachable? What will an artist learn by attending a contemporary art school or university?* The only thing art schools seem to be able to agree on is their disdain for illustrative art void of “conceptual rigor.”

The atelier steps in to provide not so much a solution to the art education crisis but an alternative path for those who are too overwhelmed by the contradictory curriculum in a contemporary art school or those unable to afford the expensive tuition of a University Art school in the United States. Atelier philosophies are consistent, their foundations are agreed upon, and their goals are stable. At ateliers students must learn the basic skills of drawing before they can move onto monochromatic painting. Following this, they can develop observational painting skills from figure models or working from still lifes. Even the amount of color is kept within manageable parameters. Students at ateliers often begin painting by using limited palette techniques. No difficult to control colors like pthalo green or quinocridone red will find a way into these paintings. Nothing contradictory, unexpected, out of the ordinary, or unsettling will confront students at ateliers. They can take comfort in the consistency and reliability of the institution and the

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<sup>117</sup> Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects*, 7.



faculty they study with at these institutions. Rather than working with faculty who have vastly different definitions of art, they will find faculty debating about which varnish to use or whether direct or indirect painting techniques offer the best methods of achieving illusionistic perfection.<sup>118</sup> The debates do not ask students to fundamentally question their definition of art and their role as a painter in today's society. Rather, they build up an ever-growing tool kit for a student who wants to develop their ability to paint. It may take many hours of training, and several years of disciplined application, but students will find they improve quickly and get closer and closer to a set of clear standards. By ignoring the difficulties and contradictions of historical art movements, ateliers are able to present a very straightforward model of education with clear curriculum and requirements. Their use of anti-intellectual pastiche contributes to their appeal in that it allows them to simplify the very definition of art. They offer a fiction to their students, but this fiction is much more comfortable for some than the reality of contradictions in contemporary art education. These institutions are a place where the definition of art is both simple and achievable. It is no wonder that they appeal to a number of artists today.

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<sup>118</sup> Direct painting refers to making a painting that does not rely on layers and glazing methods. Indirect painting relies on layers of painting often built up on top of a monochromatic grisaille. Many painters use both methods to complete a finished work.

## **Conclusion**

### **Summary of Arguments**

So far this essay has outlined the issues and concerns of the contemporary classical realist movement, the prevalence of ateliers programs, the philosophies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century atelier model, how this model is a response to inherent contradictions in art education, and the role of University art departments in perpetuating certain social biases and reinforcing divisions of status. The main point of this paper has been to analyze the role of anti-intellectual pastiche that underpins the classical realist movement and how this manifests itself in educational institutions called ateliers that reproduce classical realist subjects. Though the majority of the paper critiques classical realism, it also offers logical reasons for their appeal to a select population of today's artists and art students. The resulting conclusion of arguments presented in chapters two and three is that the form of pastiche classical realists use works both for and against their cause. It helps them attract artists who feel disillusioned or frustrated with a deeply conceptual and intellectual art world, but this very same anti-intellectualism prevents classical realists from making any real headway into the mainstream art circles. This form of anti-intellectualism is a paradox for classical realists trying to gain ground and the respect of the larger art world.

Both ateliers and classical realists call for a return to skill and technique and as a result remain illegible. They bang on the doors of University art programs and private art colleges to no avail. They remain outside the centers of power and prestige because they do not understand the fundamental rule of art production that began during the

Renaissance. The power of the artist is the ability to separate from the craftsman and skill. They cannot succeed because they want the prestige of the intellectual artist rooted in the academic tradition but they do not want to engage in the practice of intellectual discourse that would make this possible. In many ways the new academy is the University art school or private art college in that these institutions have removed skill from their fine art programs through a concerted process of deskilling and an emphasis on conceptual art curriculum. The contemporary art school now embodies the ideal of intellectual discourse and separation from craft that comprised the very foundations of the first academies. Contemporary atelier students exist outside of academies today the same way they did in the past.

### **What Can We Learn?**

That said, perhaps contemporary art education can learn from the ateliers about the emphasis on the “how” rather than the emphasis on “why.” Current art educational models are so hung up on *why* a student should make art that they have thrown the baby out with the bathwater in terms of guided instruction as to how to utilize materials. To eliminate technical instruction in all forms removes the opportunity for students to engage with their materials on a compelling and fundamental level. Though many art institutions often offer foundations programs where there are some attempts at providing skill based instructions, students find themselves still struggling with basic drawing issues, problems with understanding color, and almost no understanding of how to use oil paint. A colleague of mine once observed a painting class in southern California oil

painting with their hands. These students did not learn enough about the materials to know that they were dipping their hands in various toxic pigments and solvents while trying to be “expressive.” There must be a way of balancing the dual questions of how to make work and why to make work that continue to invigorate and inspire students into forward thinking directions.

And, although this paper spends a great deal of time critiquing contradiction, a little contradiction and lack of clarity in a curriculum is not as bad as it may seem. Ateliers are appealing in their simplicity and lack of contradiction. Yet, they are so closed off to alternative perspectives that they provide isolated echo chambers for classical realist painters. In a recent panel discussion among contemporary figurative painters including Vincent Desiderio, Adam Miller, and Julie Heffernan, the artists critiqued Odd Nerdrum’s classical realist techniques for being too explicit. During the panel discussion, Vincent Desiderio offered a short aside disparaging the project of atelier programs that echoes the main concerns of this thesis. He too believes that ateliers simplify the definition of art and offer something more appealing as a result. He explained how ateliers are problematic since they construct deep groves in the patterns of thinking that are difficult to escape once an artist is too entrenched in their process of thinking.<sup>119</sup> And indeed, this can be the case for painting students so immersed in the atelier process that they close their awareness to the perspective of the outside world.

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<sup>119</sup> Donald Kuspit, Vincent Desiderio, Julie Heffernan, Adam Miller & David Molesky, “The Future of Figurative Art and Painting.” *Booth Gallery*. June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KoT65s8-O0> (Retrieved May 1<sup>st</sup> 2017).

The ateliers and *The Art Renewal Center* provide a cautionary tale for what happens when skill becomes the end goal rather than a means to that end. Skill is a meaningful and valuable component of art education, but prioritizing it at the center of art production provides too much restriction and ignores so many rich possibilities for discovery, exploration and expression. In an informal lecture in Santa Monica, Julie Heffernan said “we should not fetishize technique.”<sup>120</sup> Heffernan is a highly skilled painter famous for her imagined landscapes that play with traditional iconography and conventions of the nude. Numerous artists fawn over her paintings for their technical virtuosity. But she points out that having too much emphasis on technique inhibits the creative process and results in a fetishized relationship with the paint that conceals other avenues of exploration. Artists like Jacob Collins, who want a very different kind of art world that focuses on skill, reinforce a narrow and clouded definition of art production. Skill is an asset and a tool that cannot become the central focus of artistic creation without creating enormous blind spots for artists.

Part of the beauty of containing contradictory elements in art education is that it forces students to generate new ideas through a process of dialectical synthesis or even cycles of complete acceptance and complete rejection. Art students face a constant need to reconcile opposing perspectives and advice resulting in a process of productive

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<sup>120</sup> Santa Monica based painter Jon Swihart has regular potlucks featuring lectures by figurative artists in his backyard. This has contributed to the development of an informal community of representational painters in the Los Angeles and Orange County. The talks create a platform for painters to describe their working process to a collection of professional painters and artists so they are able to address issues on a specific level. I attended Julie Heffernan’s talk a couple of years ago and this phrase “We should not fetishize technique” stuck with me ever since.

indeterminacy. James Elkins observed the benefits of a contradictory curriculum in the conclusion of his text *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*:

Teaching in an art department or an art school is the most interesting activity that I know, because it is the furthest from anything that makes sense—short of psychosis. Even though I have written this entire book on the assumption that it is a good idea to try for some measure of clarity, I am not sure that is ultimately such a good idea.<sup>121</sup>

Elkins is aware that his own conclusion is counterintuitive. There is a great deal of potential that can arise from open and self guided experimental educational environments. And, eliminating the contradictions in art curriculum would provide a new set of problems. There would certainly be a huge cost to remove the freedom of contemporary art education. The first Renaissance academies maintained a form of free flowing intellectual inquiry and thought. There are obvious benefits to the free forming exchange of thoughts and ideas that also take place in art schools today.

Brad Buckley, and contributors to the text *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School*, share concerns about too much restriction in art education from the perspective of an over-regulated Australian art education system. They note that free-thinking and experimental artists housed in universities constantly threaten the stability of the framework of the university in a good way. Buckley observes that, “If education is to be of any critical value in our world, it is vitally important to acknowledge that it should not be equated with intellectual and social conformity and the increasingly relentless regimes of assessment and appraisal.”<sup>122</sup> Given the increasing threat of market capitalism,

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<sup>121</sup> James Elkins, *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, 190.

<sup>122</sup> Brad Buckley, *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School: The Artist, The PhD and the Academy*. (Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College, 2009), 9.

bureaucracy, and positivist perspectives, the last holdout of radical thinking in many institutions may be the art departments. With this in mind, providing too many restrictions and enforcing too many standards may inhibit the valuable critique art institutions offer to university systems.<sup>123</sup>

This paper has also explored the contradictory nature of the college application process for young artists. This process is difficult enough for any student and for art students it is a veritable nightmare of conflicting information. To this, I offer one solution, which is to echo Penny Jane Burk's call for more transparency on the part of art educational institutions. Too much of the information is vague and confusing. Institutions themselves must be deeply self aware of what they offer and they need to advertise their curriculum in the most transparent of terms possible that an 18-year-old student with only a surface knowledge of modern and contemporary art would understand.

I remember as a high school student attending an information session for UCLA's art department. To their credit they said over and over again, "If you want to paint like the old masters, don't come here." They made it clear that if you really wanted to learn skill and technique as a painter, this was not the place to go. And that was correct advertising. I am not arguing that institutions need to revamp their entire programs to incorporate multiple levels of skill-based instruction, but rather that they be very honest with their students about the lack of skill based instruction offered. Too many students enter art education with the aim of learning how to draw, paint, or sculpt, only to find that their institutions do not offer these skills. Or, programs can direct students interested in

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<sup>123</sup> Brad Buckley, *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School*, 1-11.

learning techniques to their illustration departments which are apparently the last holdouts of technical instruction in many art schools.

### **What Remains to be Explored?**

There is much more work to be done in order to understand the implications of the contemporary classical realist movement with regard to larger issues in contemporary figurative painting. This thesis has only scratched the surface of this movement by analyzing the use of pastiche in the service of an anti-intellectual agenda. There is a lack of rich analysis of issues surrounding contemporary figurative art in general. Is there a way we can let go of some of the undue bias that lays a burden on the project of representational painting? What would a program look like that provides a rigorous training in drawing and painting techniques, yet also offers a strong emphasis on critical theory? Could these two projects co-exist in a meaningful way in one institution? For, it is not the act of representation that is the key-issue. Recent contemporary figurative artists including Jenny Saville, Kara Walker, Julie Heffernan, Kent Monkman, and Kehinde Wiley offer us engaging visions of new ways to think about the role of representation and skill in the arts. Through their eyes we can see that their skills only support the conceptual projects they provide rather than inhibit their means of demonstrating social and cultural critiques.

And, there is much more work to be done in terms of understanding the way art education and art institutions more broadly reproduce social divisions and inequities. What problematic assumptions do we make in the aim of equality when in fact these



assumptions work to perpetuate troubling biases? Are there ways of making the admissions processes more fair and equitable across barriers of class, gender and ethnicity? Contemporary feminist artist Micol Hebron's recent *Gallery Tally Project* demonstrates that there are still deep gender biases on the part of galleries with some top galleries representing over 90% male artists. If there is anything to be learned from these deep issues, it is that we cannot assume equality or progress and must always be vigilant to work towards more equal opportunities within the art world.

The classical realist movement is multi-faceted, complicated, and much larger than most art historians realize. The fact that it exists at all may even be a surprise. At the very least, this paper has endeavored to prove how important it is to consider this movement and its implications. The large scale and anti-intellectual nature of the classical realist movement provides fruitful opportunities to consider the role of intellectual discourse in the development of art markets and art educational institutions on a broader scale. There is still much more room for developing quantitative forms of analyzing this movement. These include the number of students enrolled in each program, the demographic of these students, the date each of the seventy and growing institutions were founded. I began a quick survey of roughly twenty schools and found that the vast majority of these institutions were established in the past 25 years. The number of ateliers is growing every year and with each new school come new questions about what they represent in our art world. This paper took a chance by focusing on the unfashionable, the out of touch, and the far from trendy classical realist movement. Perhaps there are other unseen movements artists, art historians and art critics avoid

analyzing because they seem unworthy of attention, or to be on the periphery of a pressing central discourse. But, hopefully this essay has shown how much can be gained from considering the bottom of the artistic hierarchy. Not all answers lie at the top. And, newness and originality, like Rosalind Krauss has argued, often relies on discourse rather than true innovation. The crisis the ateliers show us is this: What does it really mean to be avant-garde as an artist if there are no more rules to break?

FIGURES



Fig. 1 *The Stonebreakers* by Gustave Courbet, Oil on Canvas, 1849



Fig. 2 *Breton Brother and Sister* by William Bouguereau, Oil on Canvas, 1871



Fig. 3 *Nymphs and Satyr* By William Bouguereau, Oil on Canvas, 1873



Fig. 4 *Red Head* by Jacob Collins, Oil on Canvas 2004



Fig. 5 *The Pearl and the Wave* by Paul-Jacques-Aimé Baudry, Oil on Canvas 1862

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Fig. 1

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Fig. 2

Bouguereau, William. *Breton Brother and Sister* 1871. Wikimedia Commons.  
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Fig. 3

Bouguereau, William. *Nymphs and Satyr* 1873. Wikimedia Commons.  
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Fig. 4

Collins, Jacob. *Red Head, Oil on Canvas*, 2004. Wikimedia Commons.  
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Fig. 5

Baudry, Paul-Jacques-Aimé, *The Pearl and the Wave*, 1862. Wikimedia Commons.  
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