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Scrapes, Smears, Satire: On Representation and Distortion in Contemporary Painting

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I would like to present in the following paper some critical speculations regarding **several types of pictorial distortion in contemporary painting**. I will also attempt to a degree to trace some relevant historical background by way of various examples. I will be summoning three interrelated and overlapping phenomena to help frame my remarks: first, **virtuosity**; second **textuality**, and thirdly **hyperreality**. All three of these categorizations include the following: **Distortions used to ridicule, make light of, frequently to political ends; Distortions addressing identity, and shaped by social and temporal change; Distortions to question and reinterpret existing formal and aesthetically-driven strategies for painting and contemporary art in general.**

My use of the terms SCRAPE and SMEAR in the title serves both to evoke the kinds of actions many painters often undertake in—to cite the title of Gerhard Richter's collected writings—the "daily practice of painting", but also to allude to the phrase "a close scrape" as in a near miss or close call, as for example in painting a medium of which one could accurately say—to paraphrase Mark Twain—the reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated; and also that the "smear" recalls simultaneously the disparaging attacks against painting and the falseness of the claims of its inability to amount to much in the 21st Century. To satirize can equally be read as playful on one level or if you are the object of the work of satire, a smear on one's character yet again.

I. (Against) Virtuosity

A comparison is brought to mind when reading about artist **Leon Golub** at work, and when equally considering **Gerhard Richter's** varied repertoire of painterly techniques. Golub energetically adds yet soon after laboriously scrapes away layer upon layer of paint, layers accreting into the customary finished/unfinished look of his surfaces, in the end seemingly scarred. Formal effects which can be linked by association to the often brutal and horrifying content depicted in his work: torture, mercenaries, assassins, death squads. Meanwhile Richter began to use an assortment of "overpainting" techniques which curator Robert Storr has described in the following way: "the covering up of one layer by another, although this frequently involves the deliberate skinning of a painting's surface with a hard-edge tool, smearing the top coat, and mixing it with the still-moist undercoat, which is kept that way by the liberal use of carnation oil and other mediums that retard drying."[i]

When examining the likeness of Henry Kissinger in his series of portraits, Golub has stripped away also the notion of universality that he was devoted to in his earlier works of late 50s and early 60s—an existential, totemic head its surface pitted, streaked, unsightly transforms in stark fashion into the identifiable architect of many disastrous and lamentable aspects of American foreign policy: violent takeover in Chile, atrocities in Southeast Asia and so on. Golub holds up an public figure such as Kissinger almost as a wanted poster, years before many have finally accused Kissinger of being a war criminal, rather than simply considering him an aging dignitary. These "head shots" in turn recall **Daumier's** caricatures or certain of the evocative portraits of **Goya.** Golub paints "monsters" but with the significance of the realization that we can all

become monsters. In his words the violence he depicts "becomes natural, everyday stuff. I'm saying this cruelty goes on, pay attention. Those doing it, some are sadists; some are dumbly doing their job, some view themselves as patriots. I'm not trying to show totally monstrous leering figures. It's the banality of evil as well as intentional brutishness or cruelty."

Thomas McEvilley has noted "It is as if a resistance to the implications of the act of painting led him to develop a quasi-sculptural process. As a traditional sculptor removes the exterior surface of his material, so Golub scrapes the paint off till the tooth of the canvas clearly shows and the thinnest film of color is left in the interstices, giving the images a certain ghostly translucence."[ii] As Golub comments: "I would structure something, set it up and work for hours every day, then scrape and break it down for hours and days." Golub uses a meat cleaver as his tool of choice, stating "it has a much greater cutting edge, maybe three or four inches. The technological advantage is considerable with the meat cleaver."[iii] In watching film of Golub in the studio even the rasping discordant sound of the cleavers scraping and hacking is memorable.

Golub uses his representational approach to painting as a vehicle for his conscience, his social beliefs and his idealism, reflecting a Sartrean notion of the committed artist, whereas Richter has to some extent abandoned hope for worldly change at the doorstep of his studio. Richter's devotion to lavish, impressive painting far outweighs any attempt to believe in painting as capable of shaping the outside world in anything but a very limited way. Richter characterizes painting as cathartic, demanding, and ultimately mysterious and even when the artist depicts political scenes such as those shown in the famous *Oct 1977* paintings, his grisaille smears, streaks, and smudges remain only fragmentary glimpses of a maddeningly indistinct virtuosity. And it is indeed

virtuosity that I'm getting around to here, as Richter and Golub, both solidly trained painters—Richter in the Socialist Realist mode of former East Germany, Golub at the Art Institute of Chicago and Art Students' League—often willfully reject certain aspects of conventional pictorial beauty and technique and actively court and embrace others. Both artists end up as key examples of painters who seek to struggle with painting itself, its boundaries, its capacities, most often in the realm of representation.

Richter has commented "people sometimes talk about my work in terms of virtuosity. That is an absolute exaggeration. Unfortunately I am not a virtuoso at all. I have some taste. I have an eye for bad things. But in terms of making things I am not a virtuoso, and that has always been my flaw. Today, there is almost nobody …who has the virtuosity to draw something. I depend on the photograph and mindlessly copy what I see. I am clumsy in that regard, even though I seem very skillful."[iv] His protests to the contrary one has little difficulty thinking of Richter as a very mindful and indeed calculating artist. The deliberations behind his careful attention to detail when tranforming photo sources yet using a mix of more classical approaches to enact these works is clearly contradictory, tension-producing, and profligate in terms of the expansion of potential meanings.

Richter addresses blandness and banality but also the corresponding necessity of wondering about the banal, learning from it, exacting new things, new works: new ideas for objects (pace Duchamp) and new objects themselves; in Richter's words: "This is a monster [Flemish Crown] I don't need to paint a monster; it is enough to paint this thing this shitty, small banal chandelier. That thing is terrifying. I've already said some time ago that in order to dissociate myself from **Francis Bacon**, I didn't have to

distort faces. It is much scarier to paint people's faces as banal as I find them in photographs. That is what makes the banal more than just banal"[v]

With Richter his achievement lies in simultaneously retaining a near uncanny relation to the surrounding reality as transformed in paint, but then stretching and manipulating those pictorial cues which tell us (as viewers) "this is real, true and authentic", making dense, difficult pictures above all else. **Distortions both slight and drastic are the main argumentative threads woven through Richter's work, raising questions about accuracy, photography, the role of painting (and the painter) today. In relation to virtuosity, pressing questions become: What is virtuosity in light of a post-modern, perhaps post-medium and "post-skill" era? Moreover, how do contemporary artists use irony, humor and intentional strategies of distortion to distance themselves from traditional notions like virtuosity in order to create new combinations and possibilities in their work?**

On his part the aforementioned **Francis Bacon** in his famous 1966 conversations with the critic David Sylvester commented: "What I want to do is distort the thing far beyond the appearance, but in the distortion to bring it back to the recording of the appearance." Bacon furthermore had next to no use for abstract art, commenting "I believe that art is recording. I think it's reporting. And I think that in abstract art, as there's no report, there's nothing other than the aesthetic of the painter and his few sensations. There's never any tension in it."[vi]With Golub we could certainly say that he reports on contemporary events, and in images such as Kissinger satirizes his

subjects, while on on another level Richter, in both his paintings derived from photographic sources which he has sometimes designated "photographs" themselves and in his garish, sweeping abstractions is for all intents and purposes satirizing the dumb materiality of painting by lending a conceptual distance. Rather than remaining "*bete comme un peintre*" (Duchamp was of course well known for his quest to rebel against this characterization) Richter voices adamantly his concerns about "painting" writ large in his ongoing efforts to paint.

The critic Peter Schjeldahl in a 1990 essay remarked: "I now detect behind the animated lifelessness of Richter's abstract paintings, both in and beyond a disappointment patiently suffered, a lover's devotion to continuing abstraction by the only means possible after an epochal collapse of faith in its meaningful coherence." He proceeds to state "consider the deadness of the paint in Richter's lyrical-looking abstractions and then the sensuousness of the paint in the descriptive-looking countrysides, skulls, and candles."[vii] Schjeldahl highlights this crucial issue, that the abstractions despite their bright colors and dynamic flourishes of paint are somehow "dead" yet the other images beholden to their photographic origins become somehow more filled with energy and life. This is turn seems to emanate from the abstract works being almost caricatures of New York School, *tachiste*, or Neo-Expressionist sunbursts, halos, streaks, striations, splatters, and so on. These works had developed out from a period in 1980, when Richter began to practically in essence scrape and squeegee paint across the surface of a photopainting using novel cardboard, then plastic "spatulas" of his own devising.[viii]

The fact that moral and spatial ambiguities are paralleled in the works of Golub and Richter is terribly significant here. Richter seems to blur and extend imagery from a

"realistic" space in order to better show the mutability and continuing open-ended state of his artistic enquiry. He is pessimistic about political questions, but the act of painting serves as a moral stand itself. He distorts in order to complicate rather than simplify his at times very seductive vistas. Golub in another sense depicts the ambiguity of the painter/spectator in that he merges the two roles. The artist who might view horrific events in photojournalist's portrayal over breakfast brings these reports into the studio to confront his powerlessness and distance from the events in question but with the intention of recreating them on the scale of history painting. However by pushing the protagonists up-close in a narrowly confining setup recalling a cramped theatre stage, Golub forces the viewer to confront or look away, and as the painter he must look but conversely isn't able to act except as an observer, detailer, constructing the image.

And to reference Bacon once again, we find an example of the amoral hedonist, who had continued a quasi-Surrealist project always summoning past "great" artists such as Velasquez or Van Gogh and short circuiting issues of virtuosity and technique through the privileging of what the artist called "the vitality of the accident." Bacon commented in the interviews with David Sylvester: "When I was trying in despair the other day to paint that head of a specific person, I used a very big brush and a great deal of paint and I put it on very, very freely, and I simply didn't know in the end what I was doing, and suddenly this thing clicked, and became exactly like the image I was trying to record. … What has never yet been analyzed is why this particular way of painting is more poignant than illustration. I suppose because it has a life of its own, like the image one's trying to trap … and therefore transfers the essence of the image more poignantly. So that the artist may be able to open up or … unlock the valves of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently."[ix]

II. Textuality: Painted Texts and Cryptic Narratives

The use of printed text is very often associated with the conceptual art of the 1960s, but painters who have used text and image to subvert distinctions between the two forms have contributed much to shaping the manifold directions of contemporary painting. Just as abstraction versus figuration is less of a direct conflict for many younger artists neither is conceptualism vs formalism, or visuality versus textuality. In examples of work by artists from **Ed Ruscha** and **Roy Lichtenstein** to **Yoko Ono** and **Jean-Michel Basquiat** pictorial and textual information are deftly integrated, and irony and humor become central to the experience of the work, while in a number of other artists' work, narratives seems to be just outside the frame of their often cryptic, sometimes hallucinatory images.

In the early 1960s, **Roy Lichtenstein** notably zeroed in on the printed ephemera of advertising and graphic arts and made viewers look: comics became a fertile zone for extracting source material for his altered readymades. Lichtenstein became associated inseparably with both taking on the brash loud noise of commercial graphics riddled with onomatapoeia, non-sequitur, and endless repetition and reconfiguring it with a cool, critical distance. For some Lichtenstein was arguably Modernist in his elegant design and appropriated approximations of Leger and Picasso as well as 15 cent comics. But influenced by colleagues such as Allan Kaprow, Lichtenstein made a definitive leap into examining a proto-Post-modern context of the increasingly rapid proliferation of visual information, rather than continuing in a Modernist vein. In viewing a DeKooning *Woman* painting and Lichtenstein's re-representation of the work as a skeletal, structural diagram, we see the impressive amount of visual and conceptual

shifts going on in these two highly distorted yet legible images. One might intriguingly compare this as well with the near eradication of a DeKooning by **Robert Rauschenberg** approximately a decade beforehand. Rauschenberg clears away an "actual" DeKooning by effacing it, dematerializing the work by erasure and handwork, whereas Lichtenstein freezes the overheated DeKooning into an icy but directly visible series of graphic manoeuvers, the syntax changes almost as if an image scanned and converted to be read once again. Even more recently artist **Sue Williams** has used late work of DeKooning as a spawning ground for her own extrapolations on the body and abstraction after her earlier more overtly cartoonish paintings.

In **Ed Ruscha's** approach, strong senses of design, humor, and provocation merge. The artist has said that the best art "makes you scratch your head." Ruscha worked contemporaneously to Lichtenstein in the Pop period but on the opposite coast, as a California-based artist who had migrated from Oklahoma. Just as we can be hard-pressed to designate Sol Lewitt as a Minimalist or Conceptualist, Ruscha split his work between books of Conceptualist photography and the kind of word-painting we see here, Words depicted as spills: pools of disconnected meanings. Paintings, prints, and books by the artist were distinctly crisp in their execution and presentation, but skewed and quirky in their sensibility. Ruscha's work could be characterized by its disarmingly arresting blankness, a deadpan humor (other Californian artists using this: Wegman, Baldessari) which would later become commonly used in the films of Jim Jarmusch or David Lynch. Intriguing Ruscha's early works emerged at the same time as cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan's famous *Understanding Media* (1964), which elaborated such ideas as "hot and cool" media which bear interesting resemblance to

Ruscha's experiments in presenting language in various visual manifestations. **Yoko Ono's** instruction-based paintings of the 1960s such as *Painting to be Stepped On* or *Painting to Hammer a Nail Into* also offered exquisite and influential conceptual approaches to the treatment of painting as simply a visual language. By distorting and twisting viewers' expectations, the works become highly experiential.

In (re-)reading the work of the painter of the 1980s **Jean-Michel Basquiat**, it becomes helpful to recall the *palimpsest*, or "a piece of writing material or manuscript on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for other writing." Many of Basquiat's works may be characterized by this term, as he scratches out again and again words, images, replacing them with logos, pictographs, and finally more words and images. Basquiat's critical reception has been recorded in some detail in several recent studies, but I would like to view once again a number of his works in light of several of the great misunderstandings which have plagued critiques of his work, particularly at the time of its initial exhibition. Basquiat has been read—in both positive and negative fashion—as a late Modernist or as reviving older Modern tropes in the explosively contentious Post-Modern era of the 1980s. Critics who wished to praise his work invoked Modernist underpinnings to buttress it against dismissals of others, as in Rene Ricard's famous 1981 "Radiant Child" essay in which he stated "If Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet had a baby and gave it up for adoption it would be Jean-Michel." Elsewhere Dick Hebdige called Basquiat "Picasso in Blackface" and Adam Gopnik disparaged the artist's "primitive clichés."

It seems that largely because of the enormous hostility and distaste for actual painting among many of the advocates of Postmodern notions in the 1980s, Basquiat was

in general not interpreted as a Postmodern artist, unless the term was meant to signify the reactionary aspects of returning to painting. I think this has in effect left Basquiat in a kind of limbo as an artist variously eulogized by a NeoExpressionist painter in a fictionalized film, denigrated by influential critics such as Robert Hughes, recorded for posterity in the terms of the tragic celebrity biography built upon gossip, and bought and sold posthumously in the auction houses. All of this leads us away from the work and its dense, riveting complexities.

I think that fifteen years after his death it is much more important to take heed of the work's Postmodern prescience, and its labryrinthine network of links between cultural practices and moments. A painting like 1982's *Charles the First* has been analyzed several ways by multiple commentators, but I think that it is emphatically Postmodern in its import. Its references to history, music, high and low cultural production is seemingly effortless, and truly captivating. Although a friend of Basquiat has been quoted as stating "Jean-Michel never distorted himself" we can read the pictorial distortions in *Charles the First* and a number of other works as attempts to establish an individual voice within a flow of potential voices and identities, which includes both figures past, present and future. Basquiat seeks truth by contradicting the one-dimensionality and singularity of truth. A "true" statement must always incorporate multiplicity.

It frequently happens that the most cogent analysis of contemporary artworks comes directly from artists themselves, and in this regard **Mike Kelley's** 1989 essay "Foul Perfection: Thoughts on caricature" is illuminating in terms of connections between that which has been labeled high and low and the importance of distortion in many recent artists' work. Kelley draws parallels between the bodily distorted into fragments and bits within the contexts of pornography, horror films, and cartoons and

the "grotesque image of the reordered body" as depicted in the work of artists including **Caroll Dunham** and **Lari Pittman**. In Kelley's words, "the key referents are the essentialist picturing of the blob as an icon of nature and the expressiveness of gestural painting. Yet neither of these rings true: all the signs of meaning turn in on themselves. The references to nature are obviously rooted in popular sources, and the 'eroticism' of the decoration is a self-conscious construct, formalized to the point where it actually becomes unerotic."[x]

But to my mind the increase in textual intersections with the visual image in art from the 1960s to the present accompanies the steady decline in the prominence of the painting as the dominant art form in the network of "high art." Paintings today are created in abundance but have lost a "special status", and the various ways of proclaiming that Painting is Dead (initially posited by the painter Paul Delaroche in the 19th Century), have marginalized painting in a paradoxically positive sense. We can *learn* more from paintings right now, as we are not necessarily expecting them to deliver profound messages. We very often *remember* painting as we listen to Cds, watch DVDs, drive to work, flip through books, attend exhibitions dedicated to newer and newer media. Such remembrance increases melancholy, distance, and brings us to the third portion of my talk pertaining to the representations of the **hyperreal**.

III. Hyperreality

"The spectator makes the picture." —Marcel Duchamp

"Everything made since Duchamp has been a readymade, even when hand-painted"

—Gerhard Richter

Hyperreality is a highly evocative term which has many possible meanings, some of the most prominent and cogent being Umberto Eco's definition of "the authentic fake" and Jean Baudrillard's of a simulation without any "real" model. On one level the hyperreal can be associated with attempts to portray photographic realities as in the photo- or super-realist artists of the 1960s, **(Close/Hanson)** or furthermore the sensation of the simulacra associated more directly with the Post-Modern era from the 1980s onward. The hyperreal in contemporary art, can be linked to yes dramatically polished and stylized spectacles, frequently realized by photo and digital means, yet this also—if we proceed—seems to get at the notion that in terms of painting (and sculpture) we are also dealing in aftershocks, echoes, and spectres. We might name this a manifestation of painting's ghost in ghostly paintings.

As a pertinent example, **Luc Tuymans**, the well-known Belgian artist has acknowledged that the influence of television, cinema, and photography is integral to the development of his paintings in an indirect way, by stating "I only work with existing images, and what matters is how I work with them." But one of the essential traits of Tuymans' works is their subtle, strange vagueness, almost muted into a greyed-out pallor. Again Tuymans comments: "What matters to me is the image in movement. My images are mental images, formulated after the event, with a time lag. They require immobile contemplation. Painting is very difficult to memorize, to recapitulate in memory—especially the tone. That's why I work with tones, not with bright colors, not with colors straight from the tube…because a tone can grow in the memory."[xi]

I would like to present also **hyperreality** as one of the clear, distinct yet problematic trajectories leading out from the still pivotal work of **Marcel Duchamp**.

That is there are two major polarities of Duchamp's practice: the refined, spare conceptual games which in their most intricate manifestations become the *Large Glass* and its accompanying notes (*Green Box*). We could say that this is dry work almost as the dust settling on the work in progress and **photographed by Man Ray**, **(Green box/dust)** textual, monochromatic, multidisciplinary but austere and controlled. Whereas the work *Given*… which occupied off and on the last two decades of Duchamp's working life was in a sense more of a visually captivating painting, a sculpture, and full-blown spectacle than anything he had created to that point. It acts in direct contrast to the shadowy, reflective surfaces of the *Glass*. As Linda Henderson has noted, "In Etant donnes he had found yet another alternative to painting that avoided the physicality of paint and the artist's hand, although the product it created had a highly physical quality compared to the Large Glass. That work had been about transparency, invisible realities, and the virtuality of an 'apparition'; Etant donnes by contrast, presents the physical actuality of an 'appearance.'" [xii]If the glass becomes the kind of theoretical basis for a lot of work, *Given* is markedly visual, concrete. One could say that the hyperreal involves representations of a seemingly inauthentic world of surfaces, but also commentary on how to negotiate one's path through this world. A plethora of three-dimensional and installation works appeared in the 1990s to question appearances and offer a skewed and distorted view of the post-modern, as the grandchildren of Duchamp's final work.

Maurizio Cattelan is the court jester of the bunch, with his tableaux such as a depiction of the Pope struck by a fallen meteor. Cattelan deals in untruths, dissimulation, outright theft . **Damien Hirst's** *Impossibility of Death in Mind of Someone*

Living (or more simply the Shark in a tank piece) became one of the more notorious touchstones of the Young British art collected by Charles Saatchi. **Cindy Sherman's** early 1990s sex series certainly made the artificial appendages of sex toys and bondage paraphenalia into a dark and unsettling set of images. **Charles Ray** and **Paul McCarthy**, California-based artists used Hollywood-style setups and the jarring uncanny nature of the lifesized figure placed in incongruous settings, acting out dystopian fantasies. Ray initially had commented on Minimalism directly and its elimination of the human figure entirely with his works incorporating his own body such as *In Memory of Sadat.*

If paintings mentioned earlier on by a Richter or Bacon can tend toward the mystifying, or ethereal, it is the sheer, dumbly concrete aspect of **John Currin's** paintings that often makes them compelling. Currin is one of the few painters to have a big commercial and critical following at the moment and also be tagged with the label "virtuoso." I bring him up now and the term virtuoso I began this exploration with in that I think Currin benefits from a post-painterly context much as a performance artist like **Chris Burden** in the early seventies benefited by comparison with the formalist painters such as **Jules Olitski or Kenneth Noland**. Currin could be considered a "hyperreal" artist by again playing games in the Postmodern sense with using aspects of Italian Renaissance painting, late Picabia, and Norman Rockwell to address such urgent matters as how the television actress Bea Arthur would look as a pinup girl.

Currin has more to do with the calculated shock effects of clever Post-Conceptual artists like the Chapmans or Hirst than any rather generic, run of the mill illustrative paintings his work so closely resembles. His humor is blatant and ridiculous, sacrificing

depth of true satire for glibness and superficiality. Artifice is the key here, and Currin makes nothing if not attractive surfaces which betray little depth at all, much like the highly professional and slick, yet predictable and monotonous drone of the television itself. Pure paint which edges closer and closer to pure idiocy. But true idiocy involves the joy of pulling off a stupid act: think of the ferocity of stupidness in great screen comedy (Jerry Lewis or Buster Keaton) or in such movements as Dada or Fluxus. If the emptiness of Currin's approach is in some sense the mundane descendent of *Given*, the *Large Glass* has fostered also the idea of the quasi-diagrammatic maelstrom, as we see in the works of an artist such as **Matthew Ritchie**, a much more challenging artist in my view than the former whose works span floor, walls, and ceiling and intimate that painting can beat installation at its own game, wrapping the viewer in a space which is confusing but slyly captivating. Perhaps Richie's tangled distortions end up returning us away from the sarcastic sneer of a Currin and into the wonderment that can also be a valid and necessary part of contemporary painting.

Several other painters who have emerged to prominence since the 1990s have engaged in issues of simulation and hyperreality in ways which have diverted from the strategies of photographic appropriation so common to the previous decade. They include **Fred Tomaselli, Sarah Morris,** and **Jenny Saville**. Tomaselli, a California native since transplanted to New York, has recounted his early experiences of "hyperreality": "I grew up so near Disneyland that I could sit on my roof and watch Tinkerbell fly through the air. Artificial immersive theme park reality was such a nornal part of my everyday life that when I saw my first natural waterfall I couldn't believe it didn't involve plumbing or electricity. As I became further immersed in the '70s stoner

culture—the smearing of the boundaries between the authentic and the artificial was further compounded."[xiii] When reading Tomaselli's comment about the waterfall, one might note the construction of Duchamp's *Given*, which includes a waterfall "created using a lamp and an aluminum disk with holes that rotates inside a biscuit tin."[xiv]

Fred Tomaselli, was involved with the punk music scene in Los Angeles, and his works incorporate aspects of sixties and seventies psychedelia and the attitude more common among young people of the eighties that this aesthetic represents not only a lost time, but a twisted one, marked by its failures. Not to acknowledge this seems ridiculous to artists like Tomaselli and others like Raymond Pettibon who have made references to Charles Manson as exemplar of the Sixties gone awry. But we are in the land of 20/20 hindsight here and that's what lends Tomaselli's its edginess and breadth. Op, poster art, and post-painterly abstraction are liberally quoted and reconfigured for the new millenium. Unlike a Bridget Riley who took offense at the massive appropriation of her images into the pop cultural realm during the sixties, considering it demeaned the seriousness of her work, Tomaselli uses everything from collaged photographs and drugs (pills mostly) embedding them into his labyrinthine and multi-layered compositions.

Sarah Morris takes the impersonal and often generic facades of the steel and glass architecture in the (post-) modern city and uses them as templates for loud, colorful geometric paintings. Seemingly abstract they are titled to reference their initial inspiration: Flamingo Hilton— Las Vegas, Midtown—Penn Plaza (lobby). Source photographs by Morris give her the parameters for tonal and chromatic shifts, but then her use of gloss household paint makes the works into drastically refined object-like

signs. A recent catalogue essay comments that Morris "studies the contradictions between reality and quasi-reality, that reality formed by constant exposure to semi-fictitious images in the mass media." In her own words "I'm interested in the most simplified, coded way to have a conversation with the viewer." Morris distorts in the sense of streamlining, extracting, excavating sites of daily life in turn generated by the boom in industrial-corporate culture, and its corresponding annexing of urban space.

British artist **Jenny Saville** is perhaps what we could call a 21st Century hyperrealist in that her figurative paintings are generally based on photographic sources yet consistently reference more traditional painting and its attributes. In a time of a media culture saturated with depictions of so-called "perfect" faces and bodies, Saville's work brings to bear the imperfect blemishes redolent of everyday life. (and why should this seem so extraordinary?) Rather than camouflaging painterliness, it is all too evident, even amplified, into blazing impasto paint on her large- scale works. Although Saville was included in the infamous *Sensation* show, her works tend toward the subtle rather than the shocking, intriguing rather than inflammatory.

Critics have been divided on the importance of "painting" as such to Saville work, as Linda Nochlin has associated her work with both conceptual and performance art, while Barry Schwabsky states that this kind of attitude simply is representative of "a defensiveness grounded in the belief that the very act of painting is a potential embarrassment—something that can only be justified by association with more up-to-date practices." [xv] Nochlin further characterizes Saville's approach as "*post-post-painterly*,' to wrench this term out of its original Greenbergian context: painterliness pushed so far over the top that it signifies a kind of disease of the pictorial, a symptom of some deep disturbance in the relation of pigment to canvas."[xvi] As we have seen from previous

examples, contemporary artists' approaches to the hyperreal are now distinguished as much by their attitudes as techniques, and their points of view rather than simply the manner of presentation.

Clearly today, the **HYPERREAL** is not so simple to characterize as it was even a few years back, as an ever-increasing amount of immersion into artificial settings has spread throughout work, recreation, and visual culture in general. I would hope to see in the end even more evidence of the many ways that intersections between the variegated sprawl of digital media and the accelerated unification of corporate culture can effect much more indirectly and surprisingly current work of yes, painters, those not entirely old fashioned pushers of paint, smearing and scraping in their studios offering their commentary to a world that still needs their critical voices.

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[i] Robert Storr. *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*. (New York: MoMA, 2002) 55.
[ii] Thomas McEvilley, *The Exile's Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 182.
[iii] Robert Enright, "The Ambiguous Witness: An Interview with Leon Golub." *Border Crossings* v19, no 1 (2000).
[iv] Gerhard Richter interview with Robert Storr (288)
[v] Storr interview. (294)
[vi] Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds. *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 200-201.
[vii] Peter Schjeldahl, "Death and the Painter," in *Theories of Contemporary Art, Second Edition*, Richard Hertz, ed. (N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993) 130.
[viii] See descriptions of Richter's technique in Michael Edward Shapiro, *Gerhard Richter: Paintings, Prints, and Photographs in the Collection of the Saint Louis Art Museum*. (St. Louis Art Museum 1992 Summer Bulletin).
[ix] Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds. *Art in Theory 1900-1990*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 627.
[x] Mike Kelley, *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003) 33-34.
[xi] "Luc Tuymans: La peinture comme concept" Interview par Eric Suchere. *Art Press* 281 (July-Aug 2002) 27.
[xii] Linda D. Henderson, *Duchamp in Context*, 218.
[xiii] Interview with James Rondeau in *Fred Tomaselli* (Berlin: Galerie Gebauer, 1999).

[xiv] Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, David Hopkins. *Marcel Duchamp*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999) 195,
[xv] Barry Schwabsky. "Jenny Saville: 'Unapologetic'" *Art Press* (Feb 2004).
[xvi] Linda Nochlin, "Floating in Gender Nirvana," *Art in America* (March 2000) 95-96.