

Eric Wolf Paints a Picture Terry R. Myers

Eric Wolf's paintings begin in the field, in *plein air* — or perhaps "plain" air if we think that it is no longer an extraordinary act on the part of a painter to stand in the landscape, intending to paint what's in front of his or her face. The fact may be, of course, that today such an activity has become all the more extraordinary and significant. Right off it needs to be emphasized that Wolf is laboring to do primarily and precisely this in his subtly complicated (as in *plein*, i.e. full) paintings — pictures which stubbornly remain visually and physically bound to their originating sites as they conceptually distance themselves from what are very specific — and usually "picturesque" — places (in upstate New York, for example). These landscapes obviously do not look like what we see in his paintings, but to him they do. In other words, a rather direct activity — painting an image of something which is in his presence at that moment — is established in the work, not in a resulting naturalistic appearance, but rather in what becomes the necessarily mediated and expansive experience of something which is wholly resistant to representation — for us as well as for the artist. This is not to suggest that these paintings record either a hallucination or a nostalgic memory, but rather to propose that they accurately and *literally* picture what Lyotard has called the "unpresentable," presenting it as an open incident resistant to absolutes — one which provides opportunities once again to speak about something as potentially unwieldy as the "sublime" without re-invoking its oppressive histories.¹ Since they are in fact paintings (or drawings which are done just like the paintings), Wolf's work demands that the graphic mark itself remain intact in our experience of the painting as a painting and not as a depiction of a location, aligning his work in suggestive ways with that of (recent) Lichtenstein and Richter (more on this below). Wolf does this deliberately in order to enable us to face those things which are *not* immediately in front of us when we look at one of his pictures. We neither mourn nor celebrate their loss but rather comprehend how and why they are not there.

When Lyotard proposes that "the postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart

a stronger sense of the unpresentable,"² he is not only attempting to make a place for a discussion of the sublime in contemporary ("postmodern") work, but also identifying what may be the most important feature in painting done after Abstract Expressionism, the last "movement" in which the typical notion of the sublime as a feeling of pleasure derived from pain survives intact.³ Unlike Newman — or, for that matter, Pollock — Wolf makes paintings which demand, in their almost deadpan demonstration of their status as paintings, that we acknowledge the unpresentable as a necessary condition not only of the "source" for the painting (in his case, the landscape) but also of the painting itself. It can be said that the Abstract Expressionists celebrated the status of the former, but denied the latter, in their quest for the sublime.

Simply put, Wolf's pictures contain brushstrokes (the components of painting) put on *display*, not as artificially as Lichtenstein's or as extravagantly as Richter's but rather just consistent (yet "painterly") enough to make them somehow appear to be expressive yet restrained, or complete yet aware of loss, or even valid yet aware of the probability of critique (from within or without). The fact that all of this results in work of utter clarity, and not of confusion, brings us to the importance of Wolf's work: ultimately it demonstrates many of those things that painting remains capable of investigating and accomplishing for the rest of us.

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1. See my "Painting Camp: The Subculture of Painting, The Mainstream of Decoration," *Flash Art*, no. 179 (November–December 1994), pp. 73–76.

2. Jean-François Lyotard, "What Is Postmodernism?," excerpted in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 1014.

3. In 1948, Barnett Newman wrote an essay entitled "The Sublime Is Now" [in *Tiger's Eye* 1, no. 6 (December 1948), pp. 51–53], in which he concluded with the following assertion: "Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, or 'life,' we [American artists, as opposed to European artists] are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history." Contemplating what I have identified (in the essay cited in no. 1 above) as a potentially "new" sublime in the work of several contemporary painters who do not come to paintings from a "mainstream" position, it does not surprise me that Wolf (like Mary Heilmann or Lari Pittman, for example) would have a different understanding from that of Newman of what it means to make "cathedrals" out of one's feelings, specifically one's own pleasure that could be derived from one's own pain.