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Northernness and Other Considerations: At the Museums and Elsewhere

A CONSTELLATION OF TENUOUSLY RELATED EXHIBITIONS provided welcome distraction from the summer's famously unpleasant weather. Spanning four centuries, several nationalities and a notably diverse range of media, they included small-scale bronzes by the sixteenth-century Dutch sculptor Willem van Tetrode at the Frick Collection, a retrospective of drawings, engravings, and paintings by Tetrode's slightly younger compatriot Hendrik Goltzius at the Metropolitan, and a survey of paintings by the German modernist Max Beckmann at MoMA Queens. Despite their disparity, the three exhibitions were linked by what could be termed "Northernness," which translates, in the sixteenth and twentieth centuries alike, as a supercharged intensity, coupled with a degree of hardness and convolution quite different from the more rational, relaxed efforts of Italian artists of the Renaissance or French artists of the modern era. The complicated relationship between Northern and Southern aesthetics, in fact, was a subtext of all three shows.

Together, the Tetrode and Goltzius exhibitions formed an intensive course in Dutch Mannerism—the high style art of the late Renaissance—with emphasis on the connections between Netherlandish artists of the period and their Italian colleagues, a relationship that has been considerably rethought during the past two decades. The conventional wisdom, that all innovations came from Italy, except for oil paint, which was invented by Netherlanders and brought to Italy by a Sicilian, turns out to be inaccurate—not surprisingly, considering the complex links between Italian bankers, merchants, and wool traders with their Northern colleagues, and the long association of Northern musicians with Italian patrons. In the visual arts, too, there was far more reciprocity than previously acknowledged. Renaissance Italian collectors acquired works by Netherlandish artists, with notable effect; a fiery Hieronymus Bosch night scene that came to Venice early on, for example, had enormous resonance. The meticulous, empirical naturalism of the Netherlanders was admired and emulated by Italians, just as Northern artists admired and emulated the Italians' mathematically determined harmonies and proportions. (The balance began to tip definitively in

the sixteenth century with the growing fame of Titian, whose work set a standard and whose studio included artists from all over Europe, but that's another matter.)

What Northerners really envied was the Italians' direct access to the surviving masterpieces of antiquity. From the seventeenth century on, a stay in Italy, especially in Rome, was considered necessary to any serious, ambitious artist's education no matter what his origins, but even more than a century earlier, Northerners went to Italy to expand their knowledge, the German master Albrecht Dürer among them; many others came, too, some for long periods, some permanently, including Tetrode, who spent almost twenty of his fifty-five-year lifetime in Rome and Florence, before returning to Delft. (Born about 1525, he died in 1580, making him two generations younger than Dürer.) In Italy, Tetrode worked with such masters as Giacomo della Porta and Benvenuto Cellini; he copied antiquities, and looked hard at the work of Michelangelo and of Bartolomeo Ammanati and Giambologna, another émigré Northerner. Credited as having introduced the Renaissance style to the Netherlands and celebrated in his own day, Tetrode is now an obscure, elusive figure. His major stone sculptures are largely lost and his small, lively bronzes dispersed. (Questions remain about which extant bronzes were made by Tetrode, which under his supervision, and which posthumously, when his molds were acquired by other artists.) At the Frick, examples of Tetrode's known bronzes were assembled, including some "autograph" casts, as well as variants, probably achieved by the artist's alterations, and a couple of doubtful works, to provide a brilliant, eye-testing introduction to this wonderful sculptor.

At first, Tetrode seemed difficult to pin down. Many of the exhibited bronzes were reductions of famous works from antiquity, made to satisfy the appetites of eager collectors, such as the surviving portions of an astonishing ensemble commissioned by the Count of Pitigliano. The sculptures included portrait busts of Roman emperors, the Apollo Bevedere, the Medici Venus, a full-length Antinoüs, the Quirinale Dioscuri (Castor and Pollux, the horse tamers) and the Farnese Hercules (repeated, mirror image, for symmetry), all in miniature. Originally disposed in an emblematic "cabinet," with a complicated humanist iconography, the sculptures as a group seemed to anticipate the elaborate installations of marble fragments in eighteenth-century English country houses or (more eccentrically) the architect John Soane's London house. Individually, they said more about the transformation of classical forms by a Northern sensibility than about Tetrode himself. To compound the difficulty, other works were so redolent of better-known sculptors of the period—Cellini, Ammanati, Giambologna—and so marked by the agitated poses, elongated proportions, and histrionic gestures that give Mannerism its name, that it was hard to decide just what was Tetrode's. But gradually, the character of his forcefully modelled surfaces, thickened torsos, and theatrical stances declared itself in such works as a series of small, monumental bronzes of a striding

Hercules with the apples of the Hesperides—a massive, earthbound Rubensian hero rather than a classical ideal. Even Tetrode's most agile, ethereal figures share some of this quality. His intimately scaled variations on Giambologna's *Mercury* turn the famous "arabesque" pose—a forward rush with one arm thrust upward and a leg gracefully angled behind—into a static prance; Tetrode's *Mercury* peers coyly from under an arm and (in all but one sinuous version that out-Giambolognas Giambologna) raises his bent leg awkwardly in front, canceling out all associations of speed, his elongated limbs and tiny head notwithstanding.

Enthusiasm ran high, I'm told, for a fiercely muscled, extravagantly gesturing écorché, but my vote went to a horrific Hercules clubbing a centaur to death, probably cast by Tetrode himself. The brutal subject allowed the sculptor to play with complex, elegant poses and a rich articulation of musculature. The contrast between the centaur's back, arched in anguish, and Hercules' purposeful forward thrust (literally) embodied the drama of the moment, reinforced by the rhyming of the fallen victim's delicate, outstretched equine forelegs with the vengeful hero's sturdy arms, upraised to swing his lethal weapon. Like everything else in the show, the Hercules and centaur group was a tour de force, meant to be savored slowly (and handled appreciatively) by a grateful connoisseur in love with the antique. But despite its mythological subject and antique underpinnings, it was so tense, convoluted, nervous that it seemed entirely un-classical. Impeccable as his Italian credentials were, even after twenty years, Tetrode remained irreducibly a man of the North.

At the Frick, a footnote to the Tetrode show, explaining bronze casting, introduced his fellow Netherlander, Goltzius, with a selection of his virtuoso engravings of Roman emperors and classical deities, all sporting mustaches more evocative of ancient Gaul than the age of the Caesars. The combination of ravishing tonalities and peculiar imagery was reason enough for an immediate trip to the Met to learn more about the author of these remarkable prints. Once there, you discovered a figure even more puzzling than Tetrode—the curators call Goltzius "a chameleon"—a superstar in his own day, now familiar mainly to art historians; a master of many styles; a brilliant draftsman and graphic artist adept at an extraordinary range of printmaking techniques, from meticulous engraving to chiaroscuro woodcuts, who switched to painting at the age of forty-two. Born more than a generation later than Tetrode, in 1558, Goltzius (who died in 1617) spent the greater part of his working life in Haarlem. Most of what he knew about Italian art came from the prints that increasingly circulated throughout Europe, emanating from such rising publishing centers as Venice. But Goltzius, too, spent an extended period in Italy—from 1590 to 1592—assiduously drawing and engraving not only such universally admired antiquities as the Farnese Hercules, the Belvedere Torso, and the Dioscuri, but also more recent masterpieces, including Michelangelo's

Moses and Raphael's *Galatea*. Goltzius' prints of these works, in turn, became part of the pool of images available throughout Europe.

Early on, Goltzius assimilated what might be called the manner of Mannerism—the billowing drapery, slender limbs, extravagant gestures, and poised little heads that are hallmarks of the most stylish Italian art of the period—and married it to a hardheaded, essentially Netherlandish fondness for obsessively rendered detail. The Met's show included plenty of images of this type (most notably, perhaps, the cycles of narrative prints and the paintings, with their sleekly generalized figures), but there were also wild surprises, especially from the last decades of Goltzius' life: atmospheric landscape woodcuts that point ahead to Dutch art a century later, lively chalk portrait drawings that anticipate the most delicious efforts of the Rococo, and a group of stunning, vigorous pen and ink drawings made to evoke the sturdy rhythms of engraving. And more.

The key to the slippery Goltzius is the tension between the modish, idealized, high style Italian manner he so thoroughly mastered and his keen, pragmatic, essentially Northern observation of the world around him, with all its irregularity and complexity. At his best, Goltzius' perceptions take precedence over his assimilated Italian manner, as in his portraits or vivid drawings of domestic animals or—most dramatically—in a many times life-size rendering of his own crippled hand, deformed from childhood burns, but obviously no less skillful because of it. Which is not to say that some of the more typically Mannerist works in the Met's show weren't superb. These included subtly characterized, crowded religious scenes and a large sampling of the series seen at the Frick—the marvelous mustachioed emperors and a selection of classical deities, among them a Proserpina whose pose uncannily echoed that of Tetrode's *Mercury*. Most unforgettable, perhaps, was a group of outrageously foreshortened figures tumbling in space, in rondels. Engraved after designs by the painter Cornelisz van Haarlem, they were imbued with a drama inextricable from the subtle tonal inflections and linear rhythms of the print medium, which were Goltzius's contribution.

The Goltzius show was hard work; it was large, complex, and demanded close attention. And it was slightly unnerving. You emerged with both a sharpened awareness of a hard-to-grasp artist and a sense that he had escaped you, not only because of the sheer diversity of his approach, but because of the uneasy coexistence of contradictory ideas about what art could be that formed the underpinnings of his work. A similar sense of conflict and uncomfortable resolution was palpable in yet another summer exhibition of the work of a Northern artist, albeit one who lived four centuries after Tetrode or Goltzius: the thoughtfully chosen Beckmann retrospective at MoMA. Beckmann's claustrophobic tableaux of enigmatic characters in ambiguous settings—his hotel lobbies and carnival stages crowded with harlequins, musicians and people in evening dress, with bellboys, giant fish, sinister birds, and equivocal women—reveal his equally profound attraction to German

medieval and Renaissance art and to the innovative French modernism of his day. (Beckmann was born in Germany in 1884—three years after Picasso and Braque—and died in New York in 1950.) Similarly, his multiple self-portraits, each in a different guise, all at once dispassionate and probing, can be read as prompted equally by the traditions of Rembrandt and of Cézanne. Even Beckmann's haunting palette, with its sour, seductive lights and brights seemingly wrestled to the surface through a sea of darkness, recalls both the jewel-like brilliance of older Netherlandish and German prototypes and the matte intensities of Fauvism. Beckmann's sensuous touch, his subtle loading of dry, yet responsive pigment, is his own. But much of his individuality, at least in formal terms, seems the offspring of a shotgun wedding between his knowledge of the legacy of German art of the past and his understanding of just what the innovations of such contemporaries as Picasso, Matisse, and Braque, among others, had to offer an ambitious, intelligent painter with powerful inner imagery to make visible.

At MoMA, you could track Beckmann's evolution from the accomplished young exponent of a super-heated Germanic realism regarded, locally, as someone to keep an eye on, to the maker of the bitter, disquieting pictures that assure his place in the modernist Pantheon. The young painter's work changed dramatically after he served as a medical orderly in World War I. The horrors he witnessed forever transformed him and his art. He began, after the war, to filter his recollections of carnage through the model of the tight, often macabre altarpieces of the German Renaissance. The result? The cranky Beckmann we know, with his eerie cast of performers and disturbing, inexplicable narratives, his self-absorbed, detached self-portraits, his ungraspable allegories, and his packed, prismatic, disorienting spaces. MoMA's installation assembled a provocative selection of both well- and less-known canvases, including several of the potent triptychs Beckmann produced after his self-imposed exile from Germany. (The painter and his wife fled the day after the opening of Hitler's "degenerate art" show, in which Beckmann figured prominently, first to Amsterdam, where they remained throughout the war, and finally to the US.) Key drawings and prints made explicit the role of the painter's wartime experience and the atmosphere of post-World War I Germany in the development of his personal iconography. A thoughtfully chosen group of paintings ranging from personal allegories to landscapes to portraits simultaneously revealed Beckmann's individuality and his debt to both the art of the past and of his own day. Most unexpected were a handful of his little-known sculptures, especially some agile figures, obviously indebted to German medieval art, Hans Barlach, and African carvings, but nonetheless remarkably vigorous and original.

Beckmann, I have discovered, is for many an acquired taste. Those who aren't passionate admirers, it seems, regard him as a difficult, uningratiating painter whose private nightmares and enigmatic visions fail to convince. (People who knew Beckmann apparently found him

crusty, moody, and hard to like, but that's irrelevant.) The place to acquire a taste for this problematic but—for some of us—fascinating painter was at MoMA last summer.

My own summer included an encounter with if not precisely a Northern aesthetic, at least the North, as resident critic at a session of the Emma Lake Artists' Workshop, in Saskatchewan, in Canada. The workshop has a long and distinguished history, as it evolved from an informal gathering of University of Saskatchewan art students and their British landscape painter teacher, Augustus Kenderdine, at his lakeside fishing cabin, into an essential part of the experience of many of present-day Western Canada's most ambitious and accomplished artists. Barnett Newman was invited as artist in residence in the late 1950s and, amazingly, accepted, in part because, as a passionate Socialist, he was interested in Saskatchewan's Social Credit government of the time. (A probably apocryphal story has him asking, "Where is Saskatchewan and who the hell is Emma Lake?") A host of well-known "leaders" came in the following decades, including, among other luminaries, Frank Stella, Jules Olitski, Kenneth Noland, Anthony Caro, the critic Clement Greenberg, and, during a period when musicians were invited in tandem with painters or critics—probably in emulation of the experimental Black Mountain College—John Cage and Stefan Wolpe.

The effect of these well-known figures was incalculable, not because the younger artist-participants emulated the work of the "leaders," but because, through working side by side with artists they looked up to, as peers, and through discussing their work with them, as colleagues, the Canadians began to measure themselves not by local standards, but against the entire history of art. It's comparable to the effect of the "Artists in Exile" in New York during World War II. The presence of those well-known Europeans helped a generation of young American artists to believe that it was possible to make significant, adventurous art on this side of the Atlantic, not only in Paris. In Western Canada, the heightened sense of professionalism and seriousness acquired by Emma Lake alumni remains visible, particularly in Saskatchewan and Alberta, which have long traditions of powerful modernist landscape painting, and equally strong if somewhat more recent traditions of inventive abstraction that includes a remarkable number of deeply engaged abstract sculptors.

Detractors claim that the burgeoning of abstract painting and sculpture in the Prairie provinces is a mindless response to the pernicious influence of Greenberg. They are less troubled by the landscape tradition. Yet here the critic's direct intervention is indisputable, at least in connection with one eminent artist, Dorothy Knowles, the doyenne of Canadian landscape painters, celebrated for her sharply-observed, freely-painted evocations of the changing light and enormous skies of her native prairies. Knowles and her husband, William Pehudoff, an equally acclaimed painter of color-based abstractions, have a cabin on the lake and have taken part in many workshops, as both participants

and leaders. Knowles recalls struggling to paint abstractly, at the Greenberg workshop, believing that abstraction was more "serious." After seeing her landscapes, the supposedly single-minded champion of abstraction urged Knowles to follow her real passion—working from nature.

Perehudoff and Knowles were important presences at Emma 2003, visiting studios and engaging in no-nonsense discussions with the participants—who included two of their daughters, the Chicago-based Rebecca and the Saskatoon-based Catherine, both landscape painters with very different approaches and rising reputations. Landscape, in various guises, from straightforward interpretations to metaphorical reinventions and a lot in between, dominated this year's session, perhaps inevitably, given the number of established landscape painters and their younger counterparts in the group. Dramatic weather and atmospheric effects from raging forest fires in the Rockies helped. The Northern Lights, an astoundingly red waxing moon, terrifying lightning bolts, and ominous clouds all found their way, with varying degrees of specificity, into many works.

Some of the younger participants were real standouts. Some, spurred by studio discussions and the presence of their deeply involved colleagues, pushed their work into new territory, which is what you hope will happen at a workshop. I was glad to renew acquaintance with Nancy Lowry, whose studio I had visited previously, and was delighted by her urgent little pictures; Lowry transforms trees, geography, and occasional anecdotal details by means of a weird, expressionist palette and dense masses of pigment. Terry O'Flannagan's collage paintings, which I first encountered in 2000 and wrote about, here, were as arresting as ever. Made with wallpaper, linoleum, and other unlikely materials, mostly scavenged from abandoned farmhouses, with lush flower and plant motifs wholly foreign to Canada, they are imaginative reconstructions of a fictional, irrational "landscape"—a kind of aesthetic recycling that poses interesting questions.

The cause of abstract painting was maintained by Margaret Vanderhaeghe's brooding meditations on destruction and healing, with their excavations and cancellations of liquid pools of color, and by Jonathan Forrest's Hofmann-esque "slab" paintings, constructed with crisp, dense blocks of saturated hues. In both artists' work, nothing was ever quite what it seemed; colors were "off," spatial relationships skewed, surface inflections unexpected, which rewarded long attention. For pure surprise, though, it was hard to equal the work of Karlis Rekevics, a New Yorker whose sculpture I have followed for some time, and my fellow artist in residence, Clay Ellis, a peripatetic, Edmonton-based sculptor whom I have written about in this magazine.

Rekevics' enormous architectural construction, in plaster, began discreetly enough, but soon started moving into the surrounding woods. It was, like all of this gifted young artist's work, about time and urban experience, based on charcoal drawings done from memories of

things glimpsed on the long drive from Brooklyn to Emma Lake. But among close-packed evergreens, in shifting light, the plaster beams and stacked slabs lost the urban resonance they had in, for example, Rekevics' 2002 exhibition at PS 1, with gritty Queens out the window. In the Northern woods, the piece became a temple, "Adam's hut in Paradise." Startled by these associations, Rekevics constructed a lamppost and added a wash of cold bluish light to subvert the pastoral associations, which made the piece more mysterious.

Ellis, an original, inventive sculptor from the beginning, has been constructing large polychrome "tents" for some time, using tension poles, but making the connectors himself, which allows him to warp the poles into unpredictable drawing. The tents support or rise from colored "skins" whose dragged striations produce three-dimensional illusions so convincing that it is sometimes hard to decide whether or not a swelling form is real. The strangest aspect of these unforgettable structures is their intense physicality, their unignorable *sculptural* presence, despite their apparently fragile materials and the fact that they can be reconfigured each time they are assembled, depending on the character of the site. At Emma, Ellis experimented with projecting images of tents installed in France, last spring, on sheets of mesh suspended from tents built at the workshop. Much to everyone's amazement—Ellis' not least—the resulting disembodied illusions of illusions intensified the sculptures' mass and materiality, strangely recapitulating some of the uncanny monumentality of the voluptuous steel sculptures that established his reputation. When we last spoke, Ellis had no idea where these possibilities would lead, but if past experience is any indicator, his new work will be worth waiting for.