

How Americans see Americans

If seeing is about perception, then art is about the form which that perception takes. What way of seeing the viewer adopts. The viewer may be sceptical and impersonal, or emotionally invested in the object of perception. The way and form of seeing are, then, informed by attitudinal specifics. Or there may be a supposed impersonality to art. Photography is normally perceived as an impersonal art form.

It began as a perceived odd partner to painting and then came to be seen as a more accurate means of documentation—"the camera never lies" went the expression. It was of course subject to and is still subject to manipulation. Particularly digital photography which is now deemed dubious evidence in UK courts. One need only cite the doubled up photographs of a pre-Hague Milosevic's populous rallies. Yet the photograph is the foremost static means of documentation—see the images and video captures of the twin tower attacks. Given the effect of that image on the psyche of Americans one might wonder how Americans now see themselves, and through photography in particular.

The Americans may at the moment be re-imagining their cultural empire post September 11. The British, living off the memories of empire, have long since internalised their conceptual world. Martin Parr, whose ongoing retrospective at the Barbican is rightly securing accolades, is a master of the miniature. The massed and lonely hire trampolines at the seaside. The 1950's front room. The sort of mandarin wallpaper that sustains Thora Hird in the beige eddy

of her world. A booze tripper in Calais pissing to front of frame. That it is a massed drear of life one cannot deny. That it is blackly funny is equally clear.

The type of photography which he utilises is stripped of artifice. It reduces the image to pure elemental awfulness. To his type of life. In this respect Parr's work is not unlike that of American Nan Goldin, currently exhibiting at the Whitechapel Gallery, London. Interestingly attributed blame for *The Face* and *Vogue* turning to junk wail chic in the middle nineties, her vision is raw existence. Visions such as that of bodybuilder Gotscho kissing his lover Gilles, who has just died of AIDS. Or of prefab transvestites, or Goldin herself with a tragicomic damson bulge under the eye given her by an ex. The photographs have been seen by some as exploitative yet to state this is to miss their essential nature. They are permitted. They are permitted intrusions into moments of lovemaking, night swimming, dragqueen décolleté. Their interpretation is equally permissive. Such images are awkward, as is the truth of things. *Esse est veri, and that truth is a faceted thing.*

She has managed to capture some pure feelings. Such as the palpable tenderness of a couple undergoing the headswim of first love juxtaposed with the mature couple so much more ragged and aware of themselves. One truly remarkable photograph of a toddling Finn brought to mind the puckered babe in *La Madonna delle Rocce*. Some are not so strong in context. They are loose and snatched. Not a one is funny. This is not a criticism, as the artist was not seeking that type of reaction.

What was funny was the brochure proffered at the Mario Testino show in the National Portrait Gallery. Piffle. To see this show was to bathe in a drum of emulsion. Mr. Testino claims to interest himself in portraiture. He dutifully photographs celebrities through a complex of mayonnaise filters and to nil effect. There is no way of seeing here, merely a means of seeing not the one blemish writ large on each print 'POINTLESSNESS'. Though the photograph of Charles feeding chickens in a rust calico dressing gown possessed some gorm, the remainder was sheer irrelevance. Testino claims to exercise a deceptive nonchalance. Piffle. This is artless and Mr. Testino a coxcomb with pretensions.

What is not singular to the *Vogue* cover regular are said pretensions. There is an ongoing fuss afoot in the media regarding a certain ethnic Ruthenian fashion illustrator baptized Warhola. The ongoing Tate Modern exhibition shows up

Cian O'Neill
uncovers a box of
pretension in a
recent review of
contemporary US art
and photography

Nan Goldin's 'Gotscho kissing Gilles, Paris, 1993'



Testino and shows a lot of early Warhol. These early works are more interesting than the more famous and later silkscreen prints as they show what Testino is trying to do. Move towards or perhaps into serious art. Warhol had less technical skill and less money than the Italian Testino. Warhol saw America as the Americans saw it in terms of money and with no sense of substance.

To undergo the trawl of this display is to cellotape one's cornea and then rip it off. One feels blinded of the beauty in the world. For this work is emotionally vitrescent and quite perfectly bleak. Fabulous car crashes. Suicide scenes. Elizabeth Taylor. I left gasping for a Pimms and a score of paracodol. Whether or not Testino can become a serious photographer depends on people and people jammed the NPG, as they did the Tate. Warhol's early work was simply dreadful.

To enumerate but a pair of his series, one has the gold leaf figures that Chagall would have rejected as too weakly lined and C grade secondary level education pencil portraits. Meaning rubs off the surface of this art like sweat off rubber. The Warholian imprint on visual culture in general is a bed wetter shadow. Unpleasant. Reminiscent of entropy. Yet he had at least a sense of the spiritlessness which typified America in its whirl of economic growth. Testino has no spirit at all.

Yet America was not ever so. Substance in its art of self representation is fugitive perhaps, yet in painting it has been more lucky. The American Sublime exhibition in the Tate Britain was wonderful and overwrought, each rugged landscape like a manifest destiny graffiti with bombast on 11. Size is all. The much featured Mr. Church favoured sky. Sublime pink floss cloud strata, by the hectare. Cherise gull bone clouds in limey yellow sun twilights. For Cole the message was important. The message was one of grave foreboding of the dangers of immoral society and necessary fall and rise in The Course of Empire. Where though is Winslow Homer? Given that the wonderful J F Kensett was featured it seemed little reasonable his landscape obsessed peer should be excluded.

That given, the exhibition was very much worth experiencing. The effect of said paintings being that of domination. The dwarfing of the individual in those huge canvases as compared with modern American Nan Goldin's portraits shows how the American vision of America has changed. Gone is the landscape of Gog. The self is internalized, the unimportant individual important when touched on the clavicle by the plastic wand and camera flash of the artist. This is no new thing. The use of the journey inward as artistic subject matter is a cultural trend which we microscopic citizens of the west are quite happy to sit in on. We don't want to be



'Looking Down Yosemite Valley', 1865 by Albert Bierstadt

involved, to shift from Martin Parr's 1950s lounge. We just want to watch. For the frontier of brutal nature wherein Church and co. saw the Indian slay the buck is now of course a shrunken thing. The Americans are perhaps following the Europeans in re-imagining their world as something less illimitable. Their art necessarily reflects this new way of seeing. Their fresh vision of the wild frontier is more fractious. The frontier exists inside the people who make America. One sees it in the eyes of the abusive lover, the tender and hulking partner of an AIDS sufferer, in the direct glare of a yellow cab queen.

'Bad Weather, Dublin, Ireland 1981' by Martin Parr

