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The Look of Art The paintings of Rainer Gross

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The Look of Art *The paintings of Rainer Gross*



Rainer Gross, *Luxus 6*, 1987. 11.5 x 9.5 in.

Let me begin by stating that this piece is about painting, the look of painting and our visual expectations in contemporary Western society. I am not suggesting that the paintings of Rainer Gross merely “look” like art in appearance. Far from it. But I should start at a more familiar visual territory... the movies.

When Lesley Gore crooned “Look of Love” in the film *Casino Royale*, she was not singing about love, but the appearance of love. *Casino Royale*, if you don’t remember, was infamous for being the first (and only) non-James Bond “James Bond” film. An aging David Niven portrayed the normally youthful Bond and Woody Allen was cast as an unlikely and unthreatening villain. The problem with such a film is the difficulty in parodying a cartoon. The film, apart from using the song “Look of Love”, wanted the “look of Bond”.

A recent film, *The Secret of My Success* (with

impish Michael J. Fox as an innocent travelling though a contemporary hell) provides ironic visual evidence of the “look syndrome”. In one scene, young Fox, fresh from Kansas, is looking for a job (and success) in the big city. He is waiting for an elevator in a cool gray, polished granite lobby, when he spots a woman at a drinking fountain. She is an executive. (You can tell by the glasses and sensible but stylish shoes.) Fox immediately fantasizes about her. She appears in a flamboyant (i.e. expensive) dress, walking towards him with what he imagines is the “look of love”. Framing her approach on the end lobby wall is a massive corporate late-model Frank Stella painting. Yes, you guessed it, the “look of art”.

Popular film can at will, invoke the “look” and construct associations, which can reduce any object and artifact, including art, to an adjunct of “lifestyle”. Painting which once held a pre-eminent role as the

visual record of events, social position and moral example, cannot compete with the pervasive and persuasive impact of the contemporary image industry. "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em" appears to be the unspoken axiom. Hence the emergence of a "corporate" and "lifestyle" art which rivals anything created under the patronage of the church.

Something else has emerged in contemporary art — an international image with a national distinction — the "designer touch", if you will. A quick scan of any of the "significant" glossy international publications rarely reveals anything which looks "out of place". Rainer Gross, however, presents an anomaly — a German born artist, who for the past 16 years has lived and worked primarily in New York (surely enough time to assimilate the "look" of New York painting) but who has remarkably, produced a body of work which sits outside of either the "New York look" or even the "German look".

In the catalogue introduction to Gross' exhibition at the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne in 1984, writer Carl Haenlein states that Gross, "like a fish in the sea, moves through the European history of painting... and through New York as well, where he is long accepted by the art scene especially because he does everything else but assimilate..." The claim is that life in New York has changed Gross' existence, but that he is also conscious of his "European duty... the weight of history".

Gross' exhibition at the Musée consisted of a series of paintings which were based on works in the museum's collection. The controversy arising from this exhibition rested on what the local intelligentsia perceived as a "violation" of their heritage. If it were only an exercise in appropriation, then we might dismiss it as a symptom of late capitalism, but Gross used the "collection" as the starting point for another type of cultural and visual excursion. Loading "his" paintings with collage elements, kitsch landscapes and artifacts, Gross invoked not only childhood memories of events and images, but also came to terms with his own cultural dislocation.

In retrospect, these paintings have their own "look", apart from any association with their source, becoming acts of elevation rather than violation. The sacred and the kitsch occupied a common and equal ground — a visual play of history which dismissed the academic charge in favour of the artist's vision. These painting-collages were more than a cut-and-paste job. Gross is, after all, a painter.

In contrast, the *Luxus* paintings, started in 1987, are grounded in the culture of North America/New York. The subject matter is style and commodity — the traps and trappings of believing and acting out social position and status. Gross' images come from advertising, which, wrested from their ironic text, stand on their own as poignant and laconic symbols. But Gross

has done more than merely provide a painterly catalogue of artifacts. He has focused on the body and specific objects of adornment and consumerism — the simple gold band, the opulent ring with garish "rock", and distinct objects of status — fine cutlery and crystal ware. In *Luxus XXI*, Gross depicts the new social body — a group of healthy young executives (?) adorned in the regalia of urban virility — the work-out "suit". In *Luxus XXXIII*, a woman clad only in "foundation garments" (the feminine equivalence of the former), emerges out of a shimmering background of iridescent colour, staring placidly past the viewer.

Gross has avoided the obvious in his selection of subjects. There are no techno-toys or the paraphernalia associated directly with the business world lifestyle. Gross' images suggest a modern *fin-de-siècle* rather than a latent "pop" glorification of the banal.

In the small works which accompany the *Luxus* paintings, Gross provides us with another inventory of objects and artifacts, culled from advertising clippings, in a classic collage/montage technique. In the example of the single object works, Gross is able to suggest a poetic, almost dream-like, surreal presence, which is not about the inviolability of the object but the seduction of the eye.

The *Luxus* paintings, as the series title intimates, have luxurious surfaces which suspend their subjects in washes of colour and pigment. In viewing over time, the subtleties of Gross' skill as a painter are revealed.

The urge to incorporate the flash licks and mannerisms of the "look" presents a dilemma for any artist, (the desire to be "wanted" and "loved"). In comparison to his "peers", Gross almost appears to occupy an ideologically neutral ground. He is able to pin point the social nerve of North American cultural fetishism, moving freely within its biases and emerging relatively unscathed. This may not be a matter of choice, but rather the inevitable consequence of a European painter in New York. If Gross does not force a critical position towards this material world, neither does he fall into the current New York predicament of inadvertently or consciously creating new objects of luxury, à la Jeff Koons. Gross' one concession to the palpable is the use of text in *Luxus XXII*, in which he has written, "our frankfurters taste like filet mignon". If indeed we can be made to believe that franks taste like the pricier cut, Gross does not concede on the issues of painting. These works not only look like painting, they are paintings.

Ihor Holubizky

NOTE

The paintings of Rainer Gross will be exhibited in Montreal at galerie Samuel Lallouz in February 1990.