Beautiful, Vivid, Self-contained[1]

1.

The genesis of this exhibition goes back more than forty years to a visit Joe Helman made to my studio in the early '80s. There were many such visits those days, and dealers have continued to show up at the studio periodically ever since. I remember almost nothing about most of these visits — people tramping up the stairs, then back down again — but something transpired on this particular occasion that stayed with me, call it an insight tinged with a secret wish. Like much of what we want to say about art, it was a comment both obvious and counterintuitive, the kind of thing — implying more than it said — that you might tell your analyst, but would certainly not wish to impose on your friends. Proving what an inconsiderate friend I can be, Dear Reader, I am now going to share the story with you.

People of a certain age will remember that Joe was partners with Irving Blum in the Blum/Helman Gallery on 57th Street, an enlarged version of Irving's Los Angeles gallery, with its strong ties to Leo Castelli and his artists. The gallery showed Ellsworth Kelly as well as other luminaries of that generation. I'm writing about them in the past

1. This exhibition is dedicated to the memory of Janet Malcolm, from whose posthumous memoir, *Still Pictures: On Photography and Memory*, its title is taken.

tense, though both Joe and Irving are thankfully still with us. But the time I'm writing about was all so long ago; memories of that time, fragmented and jumbled, have the feeling of a door opening suddenly onto the long-suppressed meaning of a dream.

The two men were very different personalities. Irving possessed some measure of stage glamour: He was tall and good looking, with a resonant voice that carried across a room and a quick, teasing wit. As a young man he had modeled himself on Cary Grant, and the resemblance was undeniable. Joe was a midwestern type, soft spoken and not someone you would pick out in a crowded room. His dark suits did not have the bespoke flair of Irving's camel hair blazers. But Joe was fluent in the language of the 1%, being himself of the class of self-made tyros who flourished in the 1960s and '70s. He had been an avid collector in his native St. Louis before opening a gallery there and was now ready for a bigger stage.

Every dealer develops a way of talking about art that suits their personality. There are almost as many different styles as there are dealers, but the basic premise is to point out what others have missed, to entice the collector with a promise to unlock hidden value. It's essentially racing forum talk, the dealer as racetrack tout. There are long odds and short odds, and the occasional sure thing. Or, to use a different metaphor, from the overflowing supermarket aisles of contemporary art, dealers must be able to make the case for why *this* artist deserves our attention. A good dealer will craft a narrative that places a given artist in an art-historical continuum, and that also explains how the work is relevant to the way we live now (or the way we wish to be seen as living). Joe's version of the pitch was uncommonly direct. He appealed to our notion of the *great continuum of art*, the belief that art comes out of other art. Joe placed the artist of today in a direct lineage with some unassailable precursor: This artist is just like that artist (iconic, historic), only reimagined for our time. As an example of this kind of patter, perhaps the most efficacious comparison in Joe's repertoire was this: *Ellsworth is our Matisse*. On the face of it, the connection is thin almost

to the point of absurdity. When we look at a painting by Ellsworth Kelly, with its unmodulated palette of two or three colors, its geometric shapes and hard edges, we do not immediately call up a dream of Matisse's loose arabesques and complex color harmonies; even less so the view out his window in Nice, or his heavily patterned, erotically charged interiors. Nevertheless, Joe somehow made the comparison stick. Hadn't Ellsworth hung around Paris after the war, breathing in the late School of Paris exhaust fumes? It wasn't so much an actual art-historical comparison as it was the sprinkling of pixie dust.

But there was also a kind of truth to it. Because if you squint and mentally fast-forward through the midcentury decades — calendar pages flying off as in a movie montage of the 1930s — you can start to feel how something of the essence of Matisse did make the transatlantic crossing from Paris to New York; Matisse's visual syntax was propelled in a compressed form through a network of psychic cable to reemerge as a vivid and direct kind of painting. What we seek is not so much a literal one-to-one correspondence between art of the past and art today — that would be tedious — but some inner core of values and sensitivities that have been absorbed and then reimagined in a way that embodies today's sensibility, that feels new.

The equation *Ellsworth = Matisse* proved a very effective sales tool, and it was a model that Joe applied, with varying degrees of believability, to all the artists he worked with. This kind of shorthand comparison is not uncommon — we all use it at times. I'm reminded of something Robert Pincus-Witten once said to me about art history: "It's all just genealogy." But Joe elevated the practice to a kind of performance art.

It can be illuminating to think about art that way, but, like everything, you have to know how to go about it. As much as we cling to our idea of the original, sui generis artist, we also believe in a laying on of hands, of aesthetic DNA carried forward, flowering in different soil. This idea of succession reminds me of the story of the Haggadah, with its strict cadences of cause and effect (the dog bites the stick, the stick beats the

dog, the fire burns the stick, etc.). It's a metaphor of karmic transference, an aesthetic equivalent of the conservation of energy and matter.

2.

Back to our story. The early 1980s marks the beginning of a period when dealers, after years of neglect, had begun to actively seek out young artists. New collectors were emerging, and they wanted to see images they hadn't seen before. It was in this pursuit of the new that Joe made the fateful trek downtown. At the time I was making large diptychs and triptychs of mostly female figures, often nude or partially clothed, dramatically lighted and contorted in odd or unusually intimate poses, and positioned in a minimally defined interior space. Other images, as companion or counterpoint—a Parisian apartment house, a diving helmet, a vase—hovered over or near the figures in outlines of contrasting color. The whole formed a dark, slightly oppressive tableau; the frank sexuality of the gaze that seemed to pin the figures in space was combined with free-verse image poetry. The paintings were high style, brash, and assertive. They were also moody and ripe with a feeling of psychological depth. They could only have been made by someone who didn't know any better, or who didn't care about what might be considered transgressive.

Joe climbed the stairs to my modest space. He looked at the four or five large paintings on the walls for what felt like a long time, clocked the floor littered with pages torn out of magazines and other photographic references, and said: "Oh, I get it, Francis Bacon for straight people." If you look past the gender binary-ism, like many of Joe's pronouncements, there was at least a grain of truth to it. I knew immediately what he meant; in his own reductive, slightly ham-handed way he had named something about my work that I had not yet recognized myself. The kinship between me and Bacon appears in the mind's eye, if at all, like a rumor. Bacon's insistence on the human body in extremis, vulnerable, and pinned down by the painter's gaze to a chair or mattress and displayed in

ambiguous interior spaces like three-sided stage sets held — why not say it? — a glimmer of recognition. I may even have taken from Bacon's work permission for my own without entirely realizing it. In the years since Joe's visit I have occasionally tried to imagine the juxtaposition. A painting of mine next to a Bacon — would they have anything to say to each other? This was more or less an idle thought exercise, a fantasy that periodically floated to the surface of consciousness only to be dismissed, as it was impossible that any museum, public or private, would ever venture such a far-fetched comparison. Cue Tom and Janine Hill.

I can imagine the reader's reaction at this point. How could I attempt to make a group show based on such a flimsy premise, and worse, one so patently self-serving? What could excuse such an act of hubris? How could I ask friends and colleagues to participate in such transparent self-promotion? It's a fair question and one to which I have no real answer.

> In Freudian dream interpretation, the dreamer associates to details of the dream in order to penetrate its disguises and discover what surprising thing it is "about." The analyst keeps asking, . . . "What does this bring to mind?" "Nothing," the dreamer will say, "nothing comes to mind." He may then blurt out some trivial image . . . or recollection . . . that is entirely unrelated to the dream — and, of course, turns out to be the key to its meaning.[2]
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> —Janet Malcolm

2. Janet Malcolm, *Still Pictures: On Photography and Memory* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023).

3.

Questions:

The purpose of this exhibition is to consider the nature of affinity in painting. What perceptions about painting—*from the inside out*—bind diverse works together?

How can works of art be said to influence one another? How does aesthetic DNA become encoded in a painting; how is it passed on, and in what form?

What constitutes influence in painting? How to separate fashion, obvious and transitory, from the mysterious seeding of ideas that disperse like a dandelion puff in the wind?

Are there processes, perceptions, and pictorial inventions that jump across historical divides to be reimagined in a wholly different time and place?

Is there such a thing as "aesthetic personality," and can it be recognized in another context? Can a painting be said to have a nervous system? What is the psychic mapping that undergirds a pictorial attitude?

Perhaps the thorniest question of all: What is the relationship between intention and style, and is it quantifiable? Can artists of different styles—different surface attributes—have a similar *relationship* to their intention?

4.

In a lengthy essay published in the *New Yorker* in 2007, novelist Milan Kundera discusses the nature of *official* context versus influence and inspiration. He surprises us with the claim that he does not wish to be characterized as an Eastern European writer. It may seem counterintuitive in our current identitarian age, but Kundera doesn't want to be a "Czech writer." He even chafes at being compared to Franz Kafka. It is not that Kundera doesn't value the literary productions of his countryman, but as he points out, Kafka wrote in German, not in Czech. This is not merely a

linguistic quibble; Kundera is trying to give an account of how imaginative work crosses boundaries of time, place, and politics. For Kundera, the whole notion of national identity as a literary category is wrong. He gives these examples:

> [I]f we consider the history of the novel, it was to Rabelais that Laurence Sterne was reacting, it was Sterne who set off Diderot, it was from Cervantes that Fielding drew inspiration, it was against Fielding that Stendhal measured himself, it was Flaubert living on in Joyce, it was through Joyce that Herman Broch developed his own poetics of the novel, and it was Kafka who showed García Márquez the possibility to "write another way."[3]

We come back to Kafka, but circuitously, by way of Mexico and Colombia.

5.

How *does* this aesthetic transference happen? Let's pose the question in different terms. Two renowned composers on what they value, or don't, in the work of earlier artists:

> I don't believe at all in the distinction between tonal and atonal music. I think the way to understand these things is that they are the result of magnetic forces between the notes, which creates a magnetic tension, an attraction or repulsion.[4]
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> —Thomas Adès

3. Milan Kundera, "Die Weltliteratur: How We Read One Another," *New Yorker,* January 8, 2007.

4. Thomas Adès and Tom Service, *Thomas Adès: Full of Noises: Conversations with Tom Service* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 3.

[On Beethoven:] It’s not so much how he gets into things that’s interesting, it’s how he gets out of them.[5]

— Morton Feldman

There are many different ways to group paintings; the categories most often used don’t have much to do with a work’s “inside energy.” The supposed affiliations that are readily accessed fall along the lines of generation (the new painters) or geography (new painters in Canada); superficial appearance, or “style”; technology; or demographics, otherwise known as identity. Now, only a fool would say that context doesn’t matter. Of course the time and place and the circumstances in which something was made matter greatly—they are in a way the markers of what is conceivable. But they fail to give an account of why certain things hold our attention, or why they affect us as they do. A painting is more than the sum of its parts. It is the *way in which* those parts are put together that moves us, even if we’re not aware of the mechanics.

Anthropomorphizing paintings, projecting onto them the behavioral complexities that we routinely apply to people, may seem a kind of lunacy, but it’s a risk I've been taking for years; so far it hasn't killed anyone. Pictures are all equally self-evident, open, and exposed. Whatever happens in a painting takes place, almost by definition, on the surface. How then can we say of a painting that it withholds its secrets, that it is obscure or enigmatic? Perhaps it’s a matter of timing. There are objects that by design reveal themselves to us all at once, and there are paintings whose stories unfold gradually, bit by atonal bit.

Thomas Adès again, on the power of juxtaposition: “A thing becomes possible which makes another thing possible, which wouldn’t have been possible without it.”[6]

The essential thing: Juxtaposition is the art of the possible. Visual art also adheres

5. Adam Thirlwell, “Diary of Nuance,” *Paris Review,* January 24, 2023.

6. Adès and Service, *Thomas Adès: Full of Noises*, 178.

to the laws of drama: If there is a gun in the first act it must go off in the last. Certain things in a painting lay out the conditions for other things to occur. A painting can "import" elements from far away, from different aesthetic universes, if the painting itself has established a sufficiently elastic context. That which was previously impossible now begets the possible. The ways in which that is accomplished are myriad and unpredictable. For the time being, stretchy is good. Stretchy is how we live now. What we want is a stretchy Haggadah.

6.

Can the works in this exhibition be said to speak to each other? Do they even speak the same language? Even if everything is a cultural construct, how one operates within that construct is the point of distinction.

To take just one example from our show, consider the way Charline von Heyl lays the structural groundwork in her painting for the unexpected; a surprising yet seemingly inevitable conflict between different pictorial conceptions, like the last act of our drama. *This* thing—this image, this mark, this color or shape, this *interval*—requires *that* thing (the fire burns the stick, the water puts out the fire). Creating that sense of inevitability is the art. This is not merely formalism—it's the poetics of dynamism. Painting events are like notes in a melody, one note following another in specific intervals of sound and time. An atonal sequence of notes, though unlikely to sound melodic to our ears, can still have wrong notes. How can you tell? Even an infant can recognize nonsense words when it hears them. A six-week-old baby (if born to English speakers) will recognize that "pilk" is not a word. There is a similar mechanism in painting, with the mind-bending difference that it is the artist herself who must make the grammatical rules and also demonstrate in the painting how the rules are true. To make things even more complicated, not all "rules" are equally productive, and not all applications of those rules are equally meaningful.

The paintings in this exhibition, together with the sculptures, provide an

occasion to consider the nature of aesthetic grammar and syntax, and to note the adherence to similar or overlapping grammatical structures. It’s not just that something looks like something else; it’s a question of how each picture establishes its own use of painting grammar. It is in the complex nature of painting: The artist’s *relationship* to that grammar is the wellspring of their distinction.

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