ROY LICHTENSTEIN
REFLECTED

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ROY LICHTENSTEIN'S REFLECTION PAINTINGS

David Salle

In developing my thinking about Roy's work I am indebted to George W.S. Trow, who was our resident genius for my particular piece of the 20th century. This text is dedicated to his memory.

Anyone who knew Roy Lichtenstein even glancingly, and there was a time in the 80s and 90s when I enjoyed his company fairly regularly, could tell you that he was one of the great wits of his age. His sense of humor was extremely subtle—Roy could deliver the coup de grâce in the most oblique and unexpected ways. The word "deadpan" of course comes to mind, but Roy's version of it was very advanced—always perfect in tone and devastating in impact. One of the things that he brought to art was that kind of delivery as applied to painting, and one of the measures of his achievement is the unlikely pairing of that deadpan knowingness with dynamic pictorial expression.

I don't think I understood the complexity of Roy's Reflection paintings when I first saw them in his studio sometime around the end of the 80s. I thought they were over-complicated and I wasn't crazy about the illusionistic "frames" that were part of the composition; I felt it was a little bit wan as visual puns go, and one that had been in common usage for at least a hundred years. And later, when they were shown at the old Castelli Gallery on West Broadway, some people uncharitably thought that the raison d'être for the paintings was so that collectors could buy classic "Pop" paintings of Roy's, sort of, but with a twist, and at a much lower price than one would have to pay for a painting from the 1960s. Not that I thought for a second that that had been Roy's intention: he was ruthlessly serious and selective about his own work; but such is the power of the framing device of the commercial gallery, and the "theme and variation" aspect of the installation was like a collector's dream. Of course I was wrong; I've come to see Roy's later work as the embodiment of the relentlessly exploratory and self-revealing journey

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through pictorial representation that it is. By that I don't mean that the paintings are dry; emotionally, their tone is wise, even a little bit rueful. They are paintings made by someone who takes the long view of life and is somewhat, but not completely, forgiving of its infelicities. What they say is that their maker is someone who has "seen many things," and there is a more overt presence of the artist in these pictures than in much of Roy's oeuvre.

It is easy to lose sight of just how conceptual a painter Roy was. There is a lot of very loose talk today, just nervous chatter really, about conceptual painting, but it usually boils down to someone not really making much of a commitment to the materials and exigencies of paint. Meta-painting or sort-of-painting or things which mimic paintings but still hold something back are all right as far as it goes, but often the result is a kind of aesthetic or moral version of wanting it both ways and coming up snake eyes instead. Roy's work is all about painting, and for that to be manifest it has to *be* 100% painting; only by working from the inside out can the right degree of self-consciousness, or consciousness generally, be baked into the work.

A lot of this has to do with history—that is, with having a history to begin with. The radicality of Roy's approach to the problem of representing the new is that it *remembers* the old position, the old history. Roy was the oldest of the Pop artists and the one who had the longest gestation period and the longest layover in Abstract Expressionist Town. He had to wait awhile before being handed the key which would unlock his painting and allow it to overcome his fatalism and even his diffidence—essentially the personality of someone who was raised in a proper New York bourgeois way, someone who had gone to war, had seen 1940s Paris (which was essentially not very different from 1920s Paris). Part of what made Roy's work new and potent was that he was a 1940s/50s guy standing a little bit on the sidelines

when the truly new mind at the beginning of the 60s started to eclipse all the older forms (reflection, complexity or ambiguity, existential drama). Roy was very good at impersonating that "gee-whiz" American type: I think it gave him great pleasure to do so. He could express the essential *gee-whizness* of the new as someone who still remembered the old rules and could therefore register his (and the whole culture's) astonishment at the fact that we had been liberated from the old way of making meaning. A certain social contract was gone, and one of the results was the collapse of the hierarchies around which meaning had come to be codified. In fact, Roy's early Pop work was one of the things that had the effect of almost instantly de-activating the power mechanisms of the old-rules gravitas machine. You could look at a Warhol soup can, or more likely a Marilyn, and not be disturbed in your reverence for, say, Clyfford Still, because they were assumed to have nothing to do with one another. But once you'd seen a painting by Roy that depicted, for instance, a tire or a growling dog or a torn window screen, or Wimpy, the old moral structures of the Still or the Rothko or even the de Kooning started to have a horse and buggy kind of distance to them. (Something he was able to achieve, I think, because Roy grew up with the horse and buggy boys and girls, or at least he knew people who did, and he remembered, or he wanted to remember and wanted you to remember or at least imagine, what that world might have been like then, and to feel the distance we had all come from that place). He was expressing a kind of wonder at the modern, liberated world without altogether being at the amoral heart of it, that is to say, without any of the excess or decadence of it, and we all loved him for it. It was just irresistible really.

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Roy achieved another kind of distance, another kind of simultaneous history-remembering and -dismantling in the 1980s and 90s. He was confronted (as is every mature artist) by a different kind of challenge, and this more internal pressure found a counterpart in the social forces at work in the larger

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culture. The mechanized future of early Pop art had become the present, and the liberation from the old values that it had promised had come to be seen for what it was: the emptying-out process of activated consumer stimulation that left you with very little in the way of tangible values. If Pop started out as a way of "liking things," as Andy said, probably quite sincerely, its legacy in the 70s and 80s is more complicated; you can like these things all you want but they will not like you back. In fact, when you're not looking, they will rob you. It is now more or less agreed that the great liberation that was supposed to flow from the new industrial society never actually took place or, if it did, it was soon replaced by another set of problems altogether. The great leveling of social codes after the breakdown of the old 50s order just led to more anxiety, with the result that as the art of the 70s started to look like an embrace of the new social order, it also felt just a touch corrupt or at least compromised by its easy integration into the highest (if that's the right word) strata of public taste. Think of the (never actually executed) Warhol portrait of the Shah of Iran. Collapsing ironies indeed.

But these were not Roy's problems because this was not, strictly speaking, Roy's beat. If anything, despite his enormous regard and affection for his Pop brother, Roy was really the *un-Andy*. From the 70s onward, Roy expressed his distance from the collapse of social codes (something that he had helped bring about) by advancing—or retreating, I'm not sure which—into an increasingly pure classicism. While he might say to me, artist to artist, that we should never forget that we're essentially making baubles for the rich, he never let his awareness of other people's motives or their limitations interfere with what was for him a very long-term research project, one which had to do with the age-old and fundamental gentleman's agreement which reconciled form and content—that is to say brought them into alignment. Roy's *project*, as the kids would have it today, would not have seemed unfamiliar to Titian, even less so to Velázquez, and would certainly not have raised an eyebrow in the cafes frequented by Monsieur Manet and company.

right: *Wimpy (Tweet)*, 1961 (detail). Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches (40.6 x 50.8 cm).


TWEET

And it's not too much of a stretch to say that the artist is equating himself with, or better, casting himself in the role of the Wimpy/Dreamer - because that's what artists are, dig?

So what is Roy up to in this series: how do these paintings work, what kind of structures are they, and how different are they from how they first appear? In the world of a major, serious artist like Roy, the progression from the bald, early statement of intent to the reflexive, ruminating, deconstructive and corrective attitude of the late work is the visual equivalent of acquiring wisdom and then knowing what to do with it. The progression from *Wimpy* of 1961 (plate 1) to the three *Wimpy* variations of 1988 (plates 2-4) is as succinct and clear an embodiment of the idea of self-critique as we are likely to see among the big painting tycoons (as Manny Farber would have it) of the 60s. There is a way in which every long and serious career is a movement towards greater *freedom*, greater dissolution (think of Monet). In Roy's case the desired freedom, which was a long time coming, had to do with *un-doing* the very thing which had defined his style and which had enabled him to move so deftly, so stealthily through much of the last 100 years of art history—that is, the black outline. If you've staked your identity on the non-expressivity of that fundamentally "personal" component of artistic syntax, the brush stroke, it's a little hard, even 30 years later, to go for broke with a spontaneous un-plotted action of hand-wrist-arm and believe that the resultant smear of paint is going to mean anything. If you put a black outline around the brushstroke, you might be able to have it both ways. But if you remove the outline and let the thing stand on its own so that it can co-exist, both independent of and subservient to the architectonic precision of the rest of the picture, then maybe the paintings will take on the appropriate sense of distance, will become the visual sign that stands for all the traveling we've done, all the things we've seen which have changed us, all the relativity and ambiguity we've absorbed and wisdom acquired. As human activities go, as human lives go, *change* is hard enough. But for an artist to depict it is even harder.

right: *Reflections: Wimpy I*, 1988. Oil and Magna on canvas, 32 x 40 inches (81.3 by 101.6 cm).

Reflections: Wimpy II, 1988. Oil and Magna on canvas, 32 x 40 inches (81.3 by 101.6 cm).

Reflections: Wimpy III, 1988. Oil and Magna on canvas, 32 x 40 inches (81.3 by 101.6 cm).

Let's take a look at *Wimpy (Tweet)*, shall we? On one level, it's a painting of a cartoon, something sweet and nostalgic which puts maximum emphasis on the oddities of the conventions of graphic symbols (because Roy is all about graphic symbols—you have to go back almost to Altamira or the pyramids to find art which is more purely about symbolic representation). Those stars and vortex-y lines and little birdies that connote Wimpy's comatose state are just too much—who could resist them? But the painting has other levels, not the least of which is the identification of the painting's protagonist, the hapless, defeated, knocked-out Wimpy with the Dreamer—he's seeing stars and hearing the little birdie go tweet. And it's not too much of a stretch to say that the artist is equating himself with, or better, casting himself in the role of the Wimpy/Dreamer—because that's what artists are, dig?

But whether or not you buy that little riff (and I think you should just trust me on that one), our job here is to compare the original 1961 *Wimpy* to the three Reflections series versions which Roy painted in 1988. *Where has Wimpy gone?* Because here's the thing: as George T. would have said, every language has a secret moral history, and pictorial language is really no different. In these pictures, Wimpy is still dreaming his cartoon dream, but now he lies practically buried beneath the caved-in house of modernism that Roy has brought crashing down on top of him. The original Wimpy is now in a big frame, under glass, and he's likely in a museum somewhere or in an apartment on a certain stretch of Park Avenue and the reflections on the glass (the glass that is meant to "protect" him)—those reflections of his new environment are just about killing him. And you know what? He's never going to make it out of there—he will never be back on the street, will never be able to be seen simply as Wimpy again. And you know what else? All those jaggedy, obfuscating pieces of reflection which are blocking our view of the charming and lovable Wimpy/Dreamer? You caused them—I mean, we all did. That is to say the culture did it while we were editing our history to make it more palatable, more in line with the heyday of Pop. The only problem is, those days aren't here anymore (if they ever were), and all the record auction prices in the world are not going to bring them back.

In the earlier version, Wimpy was never going to wake up—he was never going to enjoy another hamburger because he was in the painting. In these later versions, Wimpy is not only not going to wake up, he is for all practical purposes shattered beyond recognition, broken into jagged shards of depiction—and he will never be made whole again. I'm sorry to have to be the one to tell you this—but Wimpy is never coming back. Pop art? What was that? The innocence and glamour of the 60s? Fame? What do they all mean now? Wimpy is history—and a part of history that most likely you weren't there to see. It's sadder than you thought it was going to be, isn't it? Consider the painting *Reflections on Sure!?* (plate 10). This painting is really just too much. By all rights, it should not be such a beloved painting. On the very simplest level, this is a painting that says: "You think you want Pop art, you like Pop art? Well, forget about all of that—it's all over now. Long gone." Cheery little painting. Of course the painting is also quite thrilling, brilliant actually, one of Roy's masterfully dramatic stagings of pictorial matter. Because the picture is about equating the erasure of the Pop image, which simply must be erased because it is no longer true, with the release of the artist into much wider (and wilder), less charted territory.

The golden haired girl in the painting is just about out of here—you can still hear her voice but you can't see much of her anymore. And what she has to say is the distillation of all ambiguity and equivocation and uncertainty of the last 25 years. She has one line, one word for us: "Sure!?" Not so sure after all. It's really fantastically brilliant. A little slapstick, a little formalist slight-of-hand, a very poignant piece of pictorial symbolism—the artist throws up a barrier of more or less abstract shapes which just about obscure his movements, and while we're trying to figure out how to "enter" the painting, under the cover of those hilarious and intractable forms, the artist, elegant and refined as ever, makes his escape.


SURE!?


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