Brendan Prendeville

Realism
in 20th Century Painting

Thames & Hudson world of art

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192 illustrations, 92 in colour

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Acknowledgments

To my mother and in memory of my father

I have benefited from too many conversations on this subject to acknowledge here, and I am greatly indebted to an abundant and diverse literature, acknowledged in the bibliography. Ian Jeffrey gave advice on some rewriting, as did Gillian Kennedy, for whose encouragement and support I am extremely grateful. Goldsmiths College granted an essential period of study leave and funded some travel, at an earlier stage.

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Richard Estes, *Escalator*, 1970

BRENDAN PRENDEVILLE studied painting at St Martin's School of Art, and Art History at the Courtauld Institute in London. He has worked as a freelance curator and lecturer, and has published articles and catalogue essays on subjects ranging from contemporary sculpture to phenomenology, and more particularly on themes relating to Realism. He teaches at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

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Introduction: Realism and its Meanings

It is legitimate to doubt that the word 'realism' has a coherent meaning, given the diverse uses that have been found for it, in changing contexts and with reference to disparate work (as this book will demonstrate yet again). As with any word that has a long history of varied use, its meaning is as complex as that history. So, rather than starting – or indeed ending – with a firm definition, we will accept the shifting one given by history and usage. To an extent, this will entail considering the main categories of painting to which the term was applied during the twentieth century: Social Realism, Photorealism, and so forth. However, to go merely by labels would be to miss the wider and deeper presence of realism in twentieth-century painting; fortunately, we can recognize realist practices, tendencies and precepts without their having been marked as such. Just as we notice the traits of common ancestry in members of a family, it is partly through reference to tradition that we may recognize the family features of realism in diverse contexts.

For those of us who have been educated in a western culture, a familiarity with the tradition in question comes with our language; people frequently refer to works of art as being 'realistic', with casual confidence. Realism can in fact be thought of as defining what is most distinctive in western pictorial practice, in so far as it derives from the ancient art of Egypt and of Greece. Renaissance theory and practice renewed and effectively reinvented the realism of antiquity, whose central object was the human figure, portrayed with a lifelikeness tempered by idealization; on which basis, a familiar 'story' of western art has developed, and has come to be given a normative status: art *should* be 'realistic'. However, as we have accepted, realism lacks a simple meaning; we may go further and admit that its meaning is conflicted or contradictory, that there is more than one tradition in play. If the art of antiquity established the basis for the western concern with illusion in art – the Greek *mimesis* belongs to the family that gives us mime, mimicry – it had a countervailing aspect in its concern to pursue a beauty that was perfect and immortal (the tempering idealization). Florentine culture of the

High Renaissance, while valuing anatomical realism in depictions of the human body, counted such images as art only when they reflected what Raphael (1483–1520) called 'a certain idea' transcending experience. Equally, while the new collectors of art might look for distinctive traces of the artist's hand, they decidedly did not seek there any evidence of ordinary physical effort. Art was emphatically not a manual activity in the sense that craft was held to be. What came to be academic rules, governing both the content and the performance of art, tended to exclude as vulgar or ugly subjects or artistic practices felt to be too basely material. In this respect, the material of painting itself is of some importance, since it was the creative exploitation of oil paint, from the fifteenth century onwards, that fostered the emergence of more corporeally realist tendencies. Oil paint is a medium that is distinctive in its capacity to remain liquid throughout a long period of working; in its malleability, it lent itself well to the rendering of perishable and changeable matter, and also had scope to reflect an extremely wide range of painterly performance. Although it was readily and at times predominantly exploited for classicizing ends, oil painting responded especially well to the rendering of realities deemed inadmissible by Renaissance-derived academic theory. (In some cases – a Caravaggio, a Courbet – it was precisely the inadmissibility of these realities that came to be of expressive importance.) Varieties of realism therefore developed over the centuries after the Renaissance which, partly in continuation of certain northern traditions, dealt with 'low' themes and evoked physical materiality. In recent western history, then, there are at least two 'families' of realism, one of which was united with, and constrained by, classical ideals, while the other, broadly speaking, was not. Uniting both, however, is a common underlying presumption or imperative that we can take as being fundamental for western art since the fifteenth century, concerning a pursuit of the real.

Some twentieth-century realism draws on classical prototypes, via the post-Renaissance academic tradition and its methods and institutions: linear perspective, the academic nude, the public-scaled work (see especially chapter two). However, as has just been noted, an alternative model for realist practice was also available to painters, and this is traceable through the low-life and genre painting of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the anti-academic realism of the nineteenth. In treating mundane subjects in terms of present time, of actuality, the painters whom we now most readily regard as 'realists'

2. **Henri Matisse**, *Male Model*, 1900. Matisse (1869–1954) here interprets the central motif of academic study, the posed nude model, in terms of methods grounded in French nineteenth-century realism. His anti-academic mentors here are Cézanne and Auguste Rodin; he had recently bought works by both (the same model had posed for Rodin). Like Rodin, he violates academic principles by accentuating the model's stocky individuality; like Cézanne, he paints by juxtaposing unblended tones. The painting marks an early stage in Matisse's modernist pursuit of perceptual immediacy.

violated the ground rules of academic art and theory, focused as these were upon the transcendental and timeless. Equally importantly, as recent art-historical writing has argued, they made viewers apprehend in a new way their own orientation to the painting. Instead of presenting, in normatively Renaissance manner, a fixed view onto an unchanging world, they represented worlds akin to those their viewers knew, and in the hands of a Velázquez or a Vermeer this engendered illusionism of a complex and paradoxical kind. The portrayal by these painters and others of mirrors and frames, used as devices to intensify illusion, also disclosed the workings of illusionism itself and made the act of viewing self-conscious. Correspondingly, the kind of viewing that was invited, and encoded, came to be part of the painting's meaning: a voyeuristic glimpse, a passing glance, a reflective gaze. The complicity between painting and viewer thus came to reach a new pitch of development. French nineteenth-century realism was crucial in this, through its particular practices, through the critical discussion it stimulated and through its lasting influence on subsequent French art. Realism, in its radical address to present experience, came into association with modernity and modernism. The reality presented in Gustave Courbet (1819–77) and, later, Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) is not simply objective, but is the real as sensed and lived: in Cézanne, what holds the world together is seen to be perception itself, since the juxtaposed touches of paint represent not merely things out there in an 'external' world, but what Cézanne termed 'sensations' – everything pulses with human sensation. This is reality in terms of the intimate knowledge each of us has of it, a 'subjective' reality we have in common – 'intersubjectivity'.

An overarching theme of this book concerns the interplay between this intersubjective, inherently intimate, dimension of realism and its more impersonally public, and latently academic, side. Often, the two sides are present together in the work of individual artists, as with Cézanne himself and a later painter such as Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964). In other cases, as with the American painter Philip Evergood (1901–73) and the Germans Otto Dix (1891–1969) and George Grosz (1893–1959), we find versions of realism that expressly disavow the academic and emphasize the coarseness in their subjects, making use of narration and satire. This sardonic vein of realism itself has a long ancestry, through William Hogarth (1697–1764) and Jan Steen (1625/6–79), and its address too can at times be intimate: there is a horrible intimacy in Goya (1746–1828).

The reader might begin to wonder where realism ends. If we take the term as defining not merely a set of practices or styles, but a central principle of western art, and describe that bluntly (if problematically) in terms of an effort to represent things as they really are, then realist attitudes and expectations can indeed be seen as having been pervasive in western culture up to the present day. Both journalism and photography reflect this cultural predisposition, and the very invention of photography could be thought of partly as an outcome or by-product of realist painting tradition. Journalism and photography came into association with painting at various times from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, or mined the same seams. We can see this in the parallels between the work of early American documentary photographers and that of the American Ashcan School painters of urban subjects; in the interplay between German *Neue Sachlichkeit* ('New Objectivity') painting of the 1920s and contemporary photography, and in the widespread adoption of documentarist methods during the interwar period (1918–39); differently again, with the Photorealists and Gerhard Richter (b. 1932). There are ways in which the spectacular realism of nineteenth-century academic painters such as Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912) carries over into cinema; conversely, there are transpositions of the cinematic into painting for radical and progressive ends – for the purpose of addressing a new mass audience, newly defining itself.

While, during the twentieth century's early decades, realist painting can be seen to be bound up with modernism (Cubism has realist aspects), there are also tendencies describable as 'realist' that developed in opposition to modernism, and in many of these cases academic realism can be seen to persist or revive, if sometimes in strange guises. The fantastic and perverse traditionalism of Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978) is a case in point. Drawing on the vein of fantasy in *fin de siècle* Salon and academic painting like that of the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901), it contributed in turn to the development of metaphysical painting in Italy in the interwar period. This was the era of *Les Réalismes*, of Social and Socialist Realism in particular, when Mexican painters modernized Italian Renaissance fresco styles and painters in the Soviet Union drew on the example of the nineteenth-century academic naturalism of The Wanderers, a group of Russian artists who seceded from the Academy of Art to mount travelling exhibitions bringing art to the people. At the same time, it was the period of Surrealism, and the Surrealist