

The rise of CORPORATE ART

*and the continued evisceration
of realism by realists*



Pfeiffer, John Pence Gallery

In 1980, the art critic Robert Hughes accused contemporary art of having become completely “monetized.” What did he mean? He was talking about the avant garde, not realism, for one thing. The critics had already dismissed realism as being dead, since about 1910. To fill the void caused by that death, the critics in the 20th century had refilled art with other content. Artistic content was replaced by political content and theory. But by 1980, the body of art was a corpse once again. Politics and theory had always been a poor substitute for aesthetics, but by 1980, politics and theory had been replaced in turn by pseudo-politics and pseudo-theory. The postmodern artist wasn't a political activist or theorist, much less a revolutionary. He or she was just an actor *pretending* to be an activist or theorist.

In the same way, the market of art was no longer selling anything real, either art or politics or theory or anything else. It was selling the *act* of these things. In modern parlance, the art market itself was a simulacrum. Having no real content, its only justification was the sale. Hence the word “monetized.” Art had become the exchange of money and nothing else.

In the 1990's, Jean Baudrillard criticized art in much the same way as Hughes, though in the flowery and cloudy terms of French Deconstruction. For him, not only art history but history itself had ended. With no terms for judgment, not only had progress ended, the *idea* of progress had ended, and with it the idea of history. From now on, history could only be a statement of meaningless events.

Although I feel some sympathy with Baudrillard's critique of art, I find it mostly hysterical and prone to misreading. The perfect example of this misreading is Jeffrey Deitch, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, whom I bludgeoned [in a recent article](#). Deitch had obviously read Baudrillard, repeating his end-of-art and end-of-history claims. But where Baudrillard had meant them as metaphor and accusation, Deitch had taken them as a business opportunity. Where Baudrillard was horrified, Deitch was blasé, or worse, tickled pink. An end of judgment and standard was just what people like Deitch had been working for: it is what had allowed them to prosper. Deitch had risen to

his position *due* to the end of art, and he could rise only in a culture that had been thoroughly debased.

What I want to do in this paper is analyze this more directly, without all the academic language. I also need to bring realism back into the discussion, since, as you know, I have never accepted that realism was dead. If it were dead in 1910, it could not still be rotting now. A skeleton does not stink, but realism stinks now more than it ever has. I have watched both realism and the avant garde get exponentially worse in just the last two decades, and that sort of thing doesn't happen after “the end of art” or “the end of history.”

I will also look at some specific examples, so that you know exactly what I am talking about. This paper is not just an academic exercise, it is a critique of actual paintings in actual galleries. Through them I will show that neither art history nor history has yet ended. We are still descending into some abyss, and the rate of that descent can still be measured. As long as the old standards exist in even one head, they do exist, and they do exist in my head, as I am about to prove.



Silvah, Simic Galleries



Corrigan, Simic Galleries

[All paintings I am reproducing here are taken from top realist galleries. I reproduce them as part of this review, which is fair use].

I have shown lots of examples of the way conceptual art has continued to devolve and dissolve in previous papers, so I will concentrate on realism here. Although I have reviewed and critiqued some realists and their paintings—as in [my ARC reviews](#)—I have not yet done a big-picture critique of realism, showing how the recent changes in realism act as a better mirror of current culture than the avant garde. Most readers should be stopped in their tracks by that last sentence, since conceptual art is intended to be the mirror of culture, not realism. Realism is usually thought to be an escape from reality, if anything. But conceptual art has atomized itself to such extent that it cannot even act as a mirror anymore. As Hughes said, a glance in that mirror only reflects back to us an image of money. Realism, however, although tenuous and attenuated, had retained enough structure up to 1980 to allow for a continued analysis. And the changes in realism in the past 30 years will allow us to follow the

continuing degradation of the human spirit, proving that history is not at an end.



Thomas, John Pence Gallery



Levin, John Pence Gallery

Now, I won't claim that a stroll through a realist gallery in 1980 was a feast for anyone's eyes. After all, realism had been by that time the victim of at least 70 years of neglect, abuse, slander, and attempted murder. It is a miracle, really, that anyone still bothered to paint then. But compared to the realist gallery now, the realist gallery then really was a place of hope. In it, one might find signs of character, hints of personality, maybe even the residue of real emotion. Mixed in with the various mediocrities, one might find the occasional sparks of real talent. Mixed in with the multitude of aspiring hacks, one might find the marks of the real artist. As late as the early 90's, you could still say this, although even then the signs were thinning. But the 90's were a time of quick change, and the last decade was even quicker. Just as politics and theory had been replaced by pseudo-politics and pseudo-theory in the 60's and 70's, realism has been replaced by pseudo-realism in the last 20 years. We no longer have painters painting paintings, we now have actors pretending to paint paintings. The new paintings often look like the old paintings in many ways, but—like the pods in *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—the paintings are empty. They have been drained of all spirit and character.



Rolfe, Morris&Whiteside



Roberts, Morris&Whiteside



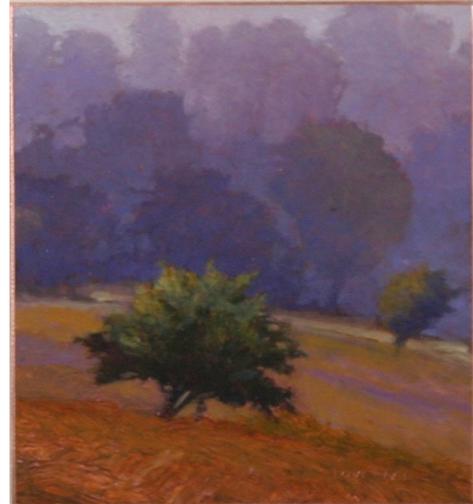
Kohn, Greenhouse

For example, historically, the landscape has been an attempt at representing nature. The painter attempts to capture the colors and lines of nature, and also the emotions those colors and lines instill in

him. But the new landscape is (at least) one step removed from that. It is the representation of a representation. It is the abstraction of an abstraction. The new landscape that you see in the new realist galleries is a piece of decoration only, and it looks like it was painted from a print-out of nature rather than nature. Rather than set up his easel in a field, the new landscape painter appears to have set up his easel at a hotel or mini-mall, where he borrowed the lines and colors from another painting, simply squinting his eyes or misting them up a bit.



Eckhardt, Doug West Gallery



Lovelace, Meyer East

Figurative painting has also become false, even when it avoids being empty. The avant garde realist sometimes tries to add emotion back into painting, but the emotion ends up looking like it was spooned on as an afterthought, or injected with a syringe. This sort of artist, who we see at places like Forum and Pence, is doing his or her best to be bleak and modern, but why? Could it be because that is what the journals have requested? These artists are signaling that they have graduated from Columbia or Berkeley rather than Disney, but that still isn't real emotion. Just because your emotions are being scripted by NPR or *Artnews* rather than FOX doesn't make you an intellectual. It makes you a different color puppet.

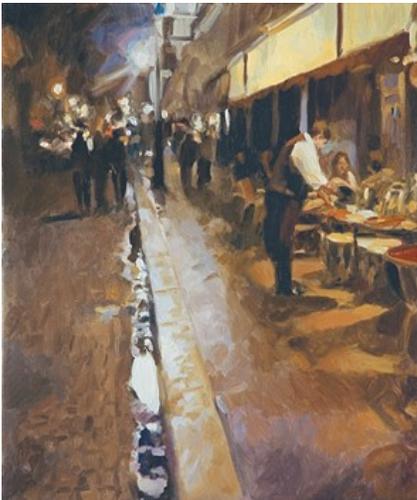


Fenniak, Forum Gallery

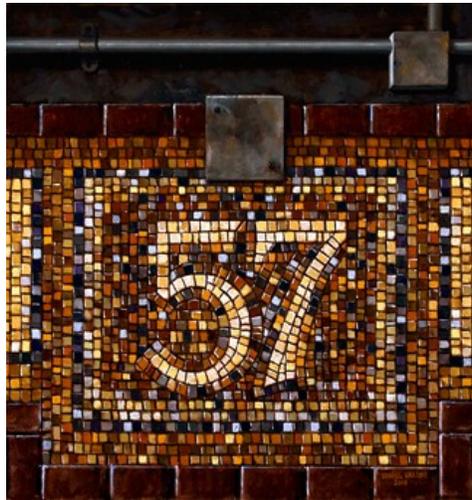


Ziegler, Forum Gallery

There are many styles of realism, but each is now chosen as a deliberate removal from any sort of emotion or character. The new artist appears to think that realism consists of the distilling of all content from any image, leaving only the lines and colors. Just as [Clive Bell](#) and Roger Fry recommended jettisoning all representation from painting in the 1920's, the new realist seems to exist in the claws or jaws of some ubiquitous recommendation that he paint *only* the representation. That is, the realist believes that he is painting only the lines and the colors: all else is to be not only ignored, but suppressed. But where Bell and Fry thought this distillation would lead to greater emotion, the new realist has no similar program or intent. Realism is not ridding itself of conventions in order to purify the history of art, it is only ridding itself of content to simplify matters. It is a streamlining of the production process.



Oxborough, Ettinger Gallery



Greene, Ettinger Gallery

In this line, I remember hearing a speech by Richard Schmid, an influential realist, who stated this pretty much in those words. For him, art seemed to be a technical matter and little more. Although his paintings did not lack all content (at least back in the 80's), his teachings stressed the technical and

abstract side of painting to such an extent that almost all students misunderstood him. The students became so obsessed with “edges” they forgot that a painting also required a subject, and not only a subject but an object. Meaning, there had to be a reason to paint the thing beyond your desire to refine edges.

David Leffel mistaught or was misunderstood in the same way. His students think that painting is all about light or lines or colors or edges or abstract shapes or something. No, *technique* is about those things. Paintings is about something altogether different. You can create a sample of technique with those things, but you cannot create a painting. The new realist creates paint samples and technique samples, not paintings.

But it took more than the misunderstandings of a generation of students to get where we are now. We might have been able to hang these problems on the high-profile teachers back in the mid-90's, to some extent, but the new realist gallery has more than one cause. Schmid and Leffel and the others could not de-spiritualize a whole decade, even had they wanted to. And these teachers themselves are caught up in some larger current, and cannot be the cause of it.



Pino



Royo

That current is the corporatization of art, and the de-spiritualizing of art by making it a naked commodity. Achieving this required not only the de-spiritualizing of the artist, but also the de-spiritualizing of the client. These empty paintings could not be successful commodities unless someone bought them, and a market always has at least two players. The pseudo-artist and the pseudo-client have devolved together, each dragging the other down. And, as we have seen with Jeffrey Deitch and the other curators, critics, and consultants, the middleman acted as an accelerant to this dragging-down. The various art administrators were already corporate types, and the corporatization of art was something they could get behind. It made art into something they could comprehend.



Trujillo, Hirshl&Adler



Reddicliffe, Hirschl&Alder

Once this current became strong in the mid-90's, it acted as its own propellant, creating still more feedback mechanisms. As the clients became more and more vulgar, less and less was required of the artist, and this circumstance happened to suit the galleries just fine. Since the client couldn't tell the difference between a good painting and a bad one, it was no longer necessary to exhibit good paintings. Since the client was satisfied by empty hackwork, the gallery was free to send the real artists packing and to hire the hacks. Since hacks have very little pride, are not temperamental, and have lower demands, the galleries are free to increase their own margins at the expense of these hacks, with no danger of an uprising. You may think I am going too far, but I have read and heard the galleries say it themselves. Many times I have heard the galleries joke that it is easier to work with dead artists—since they don't argue about percentages—but what they don't admit is that it is even easier to work with artists that have no life in them to start with. They figured this out sometime in the 90's, I have to believe, and set about looking for the proper zombies. They found them in the form of the various Pinos and Royos and so on. Once these frontline zombies got rich and famous, every pseudo-realist wanted to be one, too. The galleries are now filled with those who would love to be the next Pino. Being a zombie is the new aspiration. Unlike Faust, these artists don't even have to sell their souls: they didn't have one to begin with.



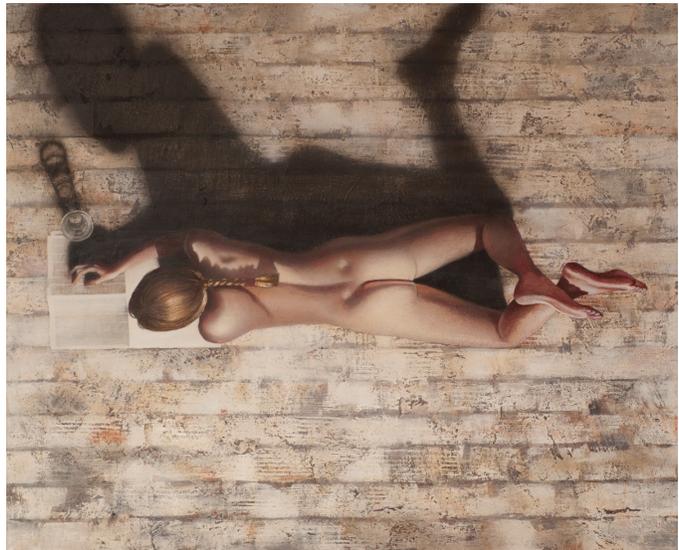
Beckman, Forum Gallery

I know this is true because a large percentage of my fellow realists don't even seem to know what I am talking about when I start talking this way. Like the clients, they don't seem to be aware that something

is missing. No, let me rephrase that: they don't seem to be aware that *everything* is missing. These new realist paintings aren't paintings, they are examples of paintings. Nothing is there. The emotional or human content is zero. The aesthetic content is equivalent to a Coke commercial or a wallpaper swatch. But this void exists unrecognized. Zombies do not fret about voids. Voids are their natural habitats. They can sit around the cooler and talk about Shrek or the halftime commercials at the Superbowl indefinitely, mimicking enthusiasm. When they get together they don't chat about Michelangelo or Titian, they chat about Kevin Macpherson or Howard Terpning. If you show them a real work of art they either yawn or cross themselves. I begin to wonder if they are required to signal the mothership at times like this, to alert them that an earthly soul still has not been extinguished.



Faulkner, Albemarle Gallery



Doig, Albemarle Gallery

Many will think I exaggerate for effect. Can I really feel such horror in a realist gallery? I can and do. It is now a revulsion beyond any argument about taste. There are many things in this world I don't care for but can abide. Art has now gone far beyond that. It fills me with a dread: not an existential dread like Sartre felt when he picked up the rock at the beach (see the book *Nausea*), but a real and immediate dread, like the dread a cat would feel in a room of a million mice. Or, more precisely, the sort of dread you would feel in a room with a million robots. These androids have faces like yours, but they do not see the world as you do: are they really your brothers, or will they malfunction the next moment and tear you limb from limb?

Some have tried to sell realism as a humanizing force in contemporary art, or as a counterbalance to the brutalities of modernism and postmodernism, but even where realism has avoided being absorbed directly into the postmodern agenda (as Currin or Saville or Nerdrum has been absorbed, for example), it has not avoided being being de-spiritualized and corporatized with the rest. An art drained of all content cannot be a humanizing, and so realism has become little more than an alternate *dehumanizing*. Conceptual art and realism have become two paths to the same end.



Adel, Arcadia



Skollar, Arcadia

We can see this by returning to my mention of Bell and Fry, who flourished in the 1920's. Bell and Fry and then Greenberg recommended dropping conventions, which led to Modernism and then postmodernism. But whoever thought to notice that realism would do the same thing, though in a slightly different way? Modernism and realism dropped different conventions, but they both “purified” themselves, and for much the same reasons. Modernism at first dropped representation to maximize emotion, and then dropped both to maximize theory. An “accidental” side effect was that art was now easier to produce. An art simplified for whatever reason is easier to create. Realism dropped emotion to maximize representation, and then dropped both to maximize decoration. And it likewise became easier to produce. It was almost like a division of labor. The whole of art was cut in half, and two markets were created where there had only been one. The avant garde would concentrate on the emotion (later the politics and theory) and the realists would concentrate on the technical matters. But further divisions and parings made production even easier. The avant garde eventually pared itself down to nothing and realism is following suit. Decoration is now too strong a word for what realism has become. New realism is now most often a mist of what once was decorative.

The mini-boom in new realism in the late 90's and early 00's, at first thought to be a renaissance, turned out to be just one more feedback mechanism in the acceleration of corporate art. Every success of new realism was immediately turned by the new corporate mindset into a pre-packaged piece of plastic, or extinguished. This was achieved completely through demand and opportunity. The channels of success were already in place, as were the clients, so that no success was possible without capitulation to the status quo. Despite some initial interest in creating art, there was no demand for it. So the required simulacra of art were produced instead. The client and gallery quickly pulled the new realist back down to their level.

So while the possibility of real art is still alive, the sad fact is there is no demand for it. Neither art history nor history are over. The potential is still there. But as long as the corporations and the corporate mindset controls art, nothing will change. If there are people with good taste out there, they haven't apparently realized that they can drive around the corporations. Just as you don't have to vote for one of the two parties, you don't have to shop for art at the galleries. You don't have to live your life by accepting what you are offered on a platter. You can go outside the prescribed channels.

I don't believe that sensible people are the majority. I don't even think they are an appreciable minority. The de-spiritualization has been incredibly successful, and I don't think there is any denying it. But I also don't believe that sensible people are extinct. You will find them, here and there. Achievement exists, standards exist, and people exist who can see what is before them. But these people need to act. They exist but they are not existing *fully*. They are complaining about the limits, but have not realized that the limits are mostly virtual. The only thing that is preventing them from jumping the fence is that they are not jumping.

That would be a good place to stop, but as I read over what I have written, I realize that although I haven't pulled any punches, I haven't been specific enough. It would help if I posted a real painting next to what I am calling a paint sample, so that the reader can see exactly what I mean. [I have done this before](#), but I will do it again here. To make it even more poignant, I will use examples from the same artist, David Leffel.



The first is an old self-portrait, and it is fantastic—one of the best portraits I have seen from the last half-century. And not just because his technique is flawless. No, it is great because he has captured himself in full emotion. All the character is there. The eyes are alive. The piece is drenched in mood. That is not just a sample of technique, it is a real painting. Leffel has done quite a few really good self-portraits, but he can't seem to get as interested in other people as he is in himself. We see this in the second painting. You will say that is just a portrait demo, but an awful lot of his output in the past thirty years has been work like this, so I don't consider it unfair to post it. Even when he finishes pieces like this, the eyes tend to stay dead. There is no one home. There is nothing there but paint. It is also fair to post because he has done truckloads of these demos for students, videos, workshops, and conferences, and because the galleries are full of dead eyes like that, painted by his students and his admirers. For some reason they have chosen to learn from the second example, not the first. Perhaps they can't see the difference?

Don't believe me? Look here:



That's by Gregg Kreutz, one of Leffel's top students. Beautiful paint but no one is home. The eyes are dead. The mood is flat. Or how about this one, by Sherrie McGraw, Leffel's most famous student and companion:



Beautiful, interesting and brave *paint*, but a lousy portrait. The paint has outstripped the painting, and you feel nothing here. The eyes and mouth are not only dead, they have been sacrificed to the technique. She was more interested in painting the eyes bravura than in giving the man some expression. The hair is the focus of the painting, with those wild gorgeous strokes, but the focus of a

portrait should *not* be the hair. If the eyes and mouth are dead, no amount of hair or paint will matter.

Kreutz and McGraw have done some nice work, and I don't mean to imply they haven't, but in general the problems of the field come down from the top: the best realists, like the worst, are now more concerned with technique than with the overall painting, and that attitude infects the entire field. It is also why they and I are no longer on the same page. And Leffel has not gotten where he is by accident: I have read his articles and he has *chosen* to get lost in technique. He has stated outright that he wanted to concentrate on the abstract qualities of painting, and he obviously believes he is better for it. The entire field of realism has followed him or one of the other teachers, since they all began saying the same thing at about the same time. Schmid, Leffel, Greene, Silverman, Handell, Gerhartz, Kreutz, McGraw, Collins, and everyone else I can think of, is now obsessed with technique. And this obsession with technique has blinded them to everything else. Most importantly, it has blinded them to the necessity of content. They don't even seem to be aware that their own paintings have dead eyes, no mood, and no character.

It may come as a surprise to you, but this lack of content is what allows these artists to flourish in the corporate market. The corporate market avoids content for different reasons, but the ends are the same. The high-end new realist avoids content because he or she is obsessed with technique. The low-end new realist avoids content because he or she cannot find it or create it. The gallery people avoid content because they can't comprehend it, and it doesn't sell. The realist clients avoid content because it frightens and confuses them. They prefer figures with dead eyes and empty poses, because then the painted people on the walls don't try to enter the room. They prefer landscapes with no mood, because then the landscapes don't compete with the furniture or the tepid conversation. It is disconcerting when your paintings are more interesting than you are, so these clients have to look hard to find a painting more blah than themselves.

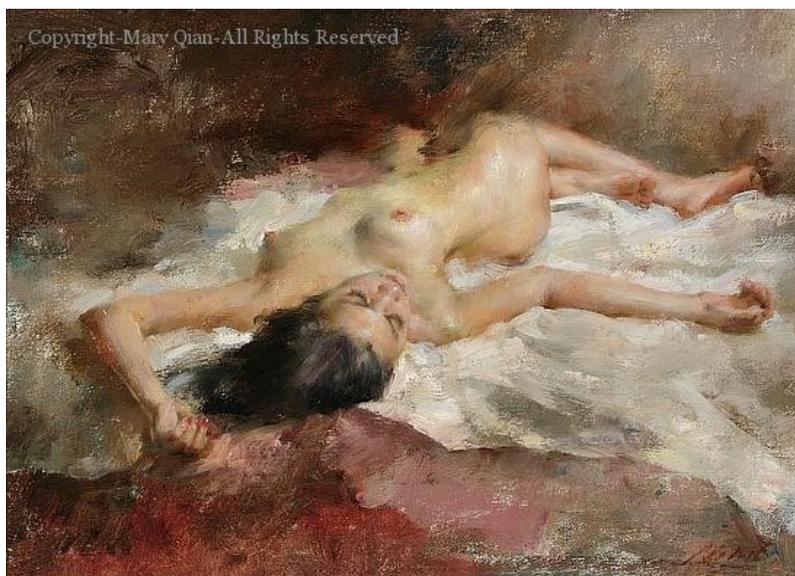
Of course there are still a few signs of hope, even this late in the game. My readers will know that I have said many nice things about Jeremy Lipking, and he seems to be continuing to buck the trend.



That is recent and it may be his best work to date. I have also been very impressed by Mary Qian. She has a lot of talent and a lot of personality.



That's a weird painting, but I love it. Let's hope Mary can avoid the pull of the market down. What may allow her to do that is the new mixed gallery, which Ann Nathan in Chicago is just one example of. Nathan is not what one would call a realist gallery, by the old delineations, and Qian is about the most traditional artist there. Nathan has no problem with weird, and would appear to require it. But this means that Qian is straddling the old markets, showing at both Nathan and Legacy, for instance. I don't think Legacy would show this work, and neither would Saks or Greenhouse. This seems to be confusing for Qian, who is experimenting with a lot of styles and subjects. Nothing wrong with that, though, as long as she keeps producing good work. Personally, I like to see this,



which looks like an old Quang Ho, but don't like to see this,



which looks like a Blokhin. For me, drips are the first sign of the road to falseness (mimes are the second). They were a sign of the end for Joaquin Torrents Llado, and they scare me here with Qian.

Now let us analyze some landscapes.



I don't care for *any* contemporary landscapes, so we will look at a landscape by Alexei Savrasov, a Russian painter from the 19th century that most have not even heard of. That painting is drenched in mood, as I hope you can feel. The second painting is by Kevin Macpherson, and is representative of his work. You will say it is unfair of me to compare Macpherson to Savrasov, but I don't think it is. Why? Because a lot of people, a vast majority, will prefer the Macpherson. Plus, Macpherson has made a lot more money than Savrasov ever did. Savrasov was not successful in his lifetime, and ended

a pauper. And if you put the Savrasov in a new realist gallery it wouldn't sell, while the Macphersons around it sold like hotcakes. The new vulgar client would find the Savrasov cold and dreary, and it wouldn't matter that it is a great painting or that the emotion pours off it like honey. What would matter is that it doesn't match their own emotion, which is small, banal, and which would like to be cheery all the time. The Macpherson also has a broader color range: it will go with a yellow couch, a red couch, a blue couch and a green couch. The Savrasov will only go with the blue couch. You may think I am joking, but I am not. The bulk of new paintings are sold on those considerations, and that is mainly what art consultants do.

Do you think Savrasov was obsessed with technique? I don't. He was a technical master, but that painting is about much more than technique. For one thing, Savrasov keeps the technique subordinate to the mood. The most important thing about that painting is not its brushwork, it is its choice of subject. Savrasov has chosen a moody scene that has a great composition. You can't get that from just taking a bunch of snapshots. First, you have to know a lot about composition, then you have to work hard to find just the right scene. You have to balance about fifty things at once, since you have to have just the right amount of detail, the right amount of color, the right amount of brushwork, the right amount of focus, and the right amount of light, among many other things. You have to have a feel for subtlety, above all, since it is that feel that allows you to balance all those things. You actually have to limit your technique, reigning it in for the greater good. But above all that, you have to transcend the abstract qualities you are balancing. That painting is much more than just a combination of abstractions. It has mood not because the combination of abstractions had mood, but because Savrasov felt something for that scene and captured it. He saw something in that scene that the freezing peasant trudging home wouldn't see, and because he was an artist he knew how to recreate it.

We may also tie all that to the greater theme of this paper. Savrasov was able to paint as he did not because he knew a bag of technical tricks, but because he had not been de-spiritualized. And his surroundings had not been de-spiritualized either. He didn't see the world as a series of snapshots, or as equivalent to a television advertisement. For him the world was still ensouled, and he felt something very real for it. And that may be the main problem of the new realist: you cannot paint a feeling you do not actually feel. You cannot capture a mood if the mood is not within you. You cannot capture a spirit you do not believe exists.

