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THE PLACE OF TECHNIQUE IN ART

a reply to Dan Gerhartz



*He Wraps Himself in Light, Gerhartz,
Meyer Gallery*

I just saw a youtube video of a 2010 conference by realists discussing the use of technology. The panel was led by Richard Schmid, if you want to look it up. Some true and interesting things were said, but overall the discussion was misdirection, if you ask me. Why? Because even the true things said about [working from life and photography](#) didn't apply to the work of the panelists. To see this, we only have to look at Dan Gerhartz.

I have written about Dan several times before, and those who read me know I have some pretty pointed opinions about him. I think he is smart, earnest, and very talented. I consider him to be one of the top realists who emerged in the early 90's, and I really liked his early work. Which is why I am so distressed by his recent work. I don't understand what went wrong.

Many realists will say that what went wrong was me. I didn't grow, or something like that. I didn't keep up. As they said about Gauguin: *C'est un malin*. He's a bad one. Maybe. But I am going to keep up the conversation, since I have said many times that artists need to argue more. Dan continues to speak his mind, though admittedly not as directly as me. I will continue to speak mine, and those listening can choose however they like. If they decide I am dead wrong, well, OK. The important

thing is not that you agree with me, but that things get said.

What I missed in the panel discussion was actual discussion. There wasn't really any of that. There was some tame statement of opinion, but no strong disagreement. Everyone was very polite. Some will think it odd that I have a problem with that, but I do. I remember that in the past, artists argued a lot about art. For me, this is a sign that they cared. Just think of the Impressionists and their opposition: always bickering. Everyone had a strong opinion, and the opinions went in ten different ways. That is a sign of healthy art. Conversely, polite panel discussions are a sign that the markets have tamed everyone. I don't remember reading about the great artists of the past having moderated panel discussions. To me it looks like another form of control, another muzzling of personalities as a nod to “tolerance” and marketing and other modern words of the day. Panel discussions aren't a means to any real end, they are just a PR ploy, another opportunity to make a chosen set of people look more important than they really are. But these very important people don't feel obligated (or free) to say anything really important, because that might be bad for business.

As we have seen over the past century, what is good for business is bad for art, and vice versa. Art is worse now because it is created by tame artists.

This panel was also conspicuously inbred. They forgot to invite any real opposition. This was insurance against any bad blood or uncomfortable remarks, but it was also insurance against anything getting done. It was a further preaching to the choir, and came off as another public relations spectacle—another opportunity to find new students and sell DVD's.

For these reasons and many others, I think the best thing that could happen to realism is a big blow up and a loud splintering, and I wouldn't mind being the cause of it. To start with, Jeremy Lipking should drop these folks like a bad cold. He is now firmly established in several markets and doesn't need the low-level PR he gets at these places. And as a matter of art, these people are just holding him back. If he keeps listening to their technical recommendations and painting to win their prizes, he will just dissolve like they have.

We already see the possibility of splintering with Gerhartz and Scott Burdick, who were sitting next to each other on this panel. Gerhartz is a born-again Christian and Burdick is now promoting Acharya S. on his website. For those of you who don't know, Acharya S. is a top lecturer on the Jesus Myth, which is a variation of atheism. The Jesus Myth has been around for almost two centuries, but it was brought into recent prominence by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, two of the “four horsemen of atheism.” Hitchens last book was *god is not Great*. Now, I am neither a Christian [nor an atheist](#), and [I am not a fan of Hitchens](#). However, it occurs to me that Burdick may be telling us—via Acharya S.—that Gerhartz is not so much wrapping himself in light (see painting above) as wrapping himself in false pieties. I don't know Dan and Scott and can't say. But this is not where the splintering should take place, as I will show below. Art should splinter on artistic lines, and we have plenty of important wedges that are being ignored. We are not rebels without causes here, and we do not need to go to religion to invent or import them. There is plenty to discuss without bringing Jesus into it. Burdick may be pushing back against Gerhartz in some way, that is, but as a matter of technique almost everything I will say about Gerhartz also applies to Burdick.



Burdick, Gallery 1261

Dan said that he didn't like painting from photos, because it was like an intellectual exercise. You had to try to figure things out, remember what the real subject really looked like. But painting from life, he said, is more spiritual. You connect to the things in front of you. True, as far as it goes. I actually agree with all that. If you read those sentences thinking I was adding vinegar to them, you are wrong. With no context, he is right. But *in* context, the plot thickens. If we study Dan's work, we see that the question of life versus photos simply dissolves in the face of bigger questions.

To start with, by stating things this way Dan must be implying that he wants his paintings to be more spiritual and less intellectual. He must also be implying that he works from life to better see what is really there. He doesn't want the color and contrast misrepresentations of photography. If we judge those statements detached from his work, they make some sense. If we judge those statements connected to his work, they make no sense. Dan has chosen to boost all his colors by a large amount, so it doesn't really matter whether he is working from life or photography. His work looks nothing like life. His color scheme is not given him by nature, it is actually an *intellectual* choice.

Ask yourself this: is there anything more spiritual about high chroma or color boosting? I would say no. It is a falsification like any other, and one might argue that any falsification is both un-natural and un-spiritual. All abstraction is based in the intellect, and Dan's paintings have become more and more abstract over the years, *on purpose*. Obviously, the more abstract your painting becomes, the less it matters what sources you are using. The main source that Dan is using is his intellect. He has chosen to paint things like he has because he has decided it is best to. That is mainly a technical choice, not a spiritual one.

We see more contradictions if we look closely at a sample painting. See the detail of his image [Violet](#), in portfolio 3 on his website (Dan saw me coming and made it impossible to borrow it for this review). Dan says he wants to make a connection to his subject, but here he has only made a connection to his *paint*. The girl is not there. Only the colors and strokes are there. We can get this just from the title, where Dan admits it. This painting is about a color. You don't know who the girl is or care who she is. That wasn't the point of the painting. The point of the painting was a combination of yellow and purple, in a composition that balanced fan, flowers, nicknacks, and girl. But the girl is no more important than the fan and the flowers. In fact, she is *behind* the fan and the flowers, and isn't painted with as much care as the flowers are.

Look closely at her hair. Dan used to be pretty good at hair, but this has devolved to butterscotch and blue stripes. Do you need to paint from life to make hair into butterscotch and blue stripes?

The hands are another clue. Once upon a time, Dan could paint a hand that looked like a hand. This hand above the fan looks more like a beige and blue claw. You don't sharpen fingers like that because you are working from life. You do it for some weird reason of speed or bad taste. A real hand takes some appreciable time and effort to paint. That hand probably took Dan about three minutes.

Dan isn't connected to life anymore, he is connected to Pino by some strange lifeline. His work looks more and more like Pino's work every year: all he is lacking is the mannequins in aprons. Like Pino and so many others, Dan needs to be ticketed for an overuse of flowers, satin, and crockery. He is a menace to the native flower population.

As I say, this is very distressing to me, because although we have never seen Pino do any better, we have seen Dan do much much better. Dan was better by far in the early 90's, before he turned on the glitz and glare, and before his galleries required him to paint 70 paintings a year (or whatever it is).

I think Dan has totally disconnected from life for some reason, which makes his insistence on painting from life look strange. He is hiding in these fake little Heartland images to avoid coming face to face with any reality, and his technique is another purposeful disconnect from reality. Of course the same has been said of me, hiding from the Brave New World by cloistering myself with pretty women. But Dan outstripped me in that regard many years ago. My subject matter may be limited and un-modern, but at least I still *see* the women I am painting. They haven't dissolved into a morass of brushstrokes and color. In my paintings, the technique supports the model and is secondary to her. In most other realist paintings I have seen, the model supports the technique. The model is just there to provide an excuse for another technical exercise. She is nothing more than a prop, and whether she is actually painted from a mannequin no longer matters. She looks like a mannequin regardless.

In the same way, it doesn't matter if the new realists are painting from photos or life. What matters is that they aren't getting the job done, that job being to create solid paintings. Whatever style they are choosing, loose or tight, they aren't making the connection to the subject that needs to be made. This whole argument isn't or shouldn't be about life versus photos, or loose versus tight, or boosted colors versus natural colors. The fact that realists are discussing these things is proof in itself that they have lost sight of the bigger issues. Great paintings have been made with all these methods in the past, but they aren't being made now. They aren't being made because realists have forgotten that painting is about more than just technique. A great painting has to have a great subject, and the artist has to have some real connection to that subject.

Nor is it just the realists in the Schmid/Leffel wing who have been swamped by technique. The whole Nelson Shanks/Jacob Collins wing is also swamped, though in a slightly different way. Whether they are painting loose or tight, the contemporary realists of all schools are subordinating everything to technique. Put simply, these guys have a huge excess of technique and it gets in the way of the art. Too much color, too much detail, too much clutter, too much attention to all the nuts and bolts of painting, so that the eye is led off track. The artist's connection to his subject should be primary, and the technique, whatever it is, should just support that. It should never usurp it. But in contemporary realism, it almost always does. By and large, realists spend too much time fiddling with their tools and too little time looking for great subjects.

As an example of this, we may look at Rose Franzen, another panelist in this discussion. She was

sitting right next to Dan, and that is appropriate because Dan and Rose have followed one another in style over the last decade or more. Seeing her there, I realized I hadn't searched on her name in a while, so I did. What came up first is her Portrait of Maquoketa, which was exhibited for eight months at the Smithsonian. To create it, Rose sat in a store front and invited anyone who passed by in this small Iowa town to sit for a portrait. The finished piece appeals to the same sort of Heartland sentimentality that Dan's work does, but in an even more generalized way. It may seem mean-spirited to criticize such a work, because, well, who can criticize smiling neighbors, but I'm afraid that won't stop me. In truth, I have nothing against the work or the idea, in principle. We certainly need more neighborliness in this country, and painting your neighbors is a fine form of that. However, Rose is being sold as one of the top realists in the country, and judged that way, this idea falls a bit short, to say the least. Why? Because it fails to lead to a great work of art or even a good work of art. To speak the truth, Rose looks pretty uninspired here: all face-on, head-only portraits, in lazy light, painted quickly and lazily. This is not to be wondered at, since she did all 180 of them in a single year.

That's right, an entire year was devoted to this idea. Maybe it's just me, *un malin*, but I have trouble believing Rose is that devoted to her neighbors. I think she is more likely to be devoted to publicity. I have known a lot of people who have done things like this, and in *every* case it was publicity, not love that drove it. But this is small-town Iowa, right? People are saints there, right? I don't know, I don't live there, but I am skeptical.

But *even if* this was driven by love, it still didn't lead to a great painting, which was my point. My point was that realists can't find great subjects, and this is not a great subject. It was a chore. If done with love, it may have been a blessed chore, but it looks like a chore nonetheless. And, it must be said, it looks like a piece of publicity even if it isn't.

The bottom line is that if you study the great works of history, you don't see subjects like this. You also don't see flaccid Heartland scenes, you don't see yuppies in coffeeshops (like Oxborough and Levin and many others), you don't see close-ups of subway walls or turnstiles (Greene, etc.), you don't see portraits of blenders or cars, you don't see a lemon and a grape, you don't see a candy wrapper, you don't see anonymous lighthouses or cottages (Kinkade), and you don't see sluts in aprons and highheels (Pino). Most of all, you don't see paint standing in for a painting, not even with the Impressionists or the Post-Impressionists. Guys like Van Gogh and Gauguin were doing some pretty weird things with color and line, but they weren't hiding behind it. Except for Seurat, they weren't dissolving reality in a vat of technique.

This is one of the many things realists have failed to learn from the Moderns. Realists have borrowed their boosted colors from the Impressionists and Fauves, but they haven't learned the primary lessons of history. The primary lesson of recent history is this: DON'T GET LOST IN YOUR TECHNIQUE OR IN YOUR HEAD! The danger of abstraction. Ironically, the realists have fallen to that danger in the past century just as much as anyone else has. In a previous paper, I have shown how David Leffel fell to it, and most of the other panelists in the discussion have fallen to it, including Quang Ho, Carolyn Anderson, Schmid, and all the rest. They have all dissolved over the years, one way or another, melted by their own fatal misconceptions. They had started out as classicists or idealists of some sort, and had tried to define themselves in opposition to the main line of current thought in art. But Modernism got them anyway.

How can this be? you may ask. How could realists have been cut by the same sword as the rest? How could realism, which for so long resisted abstraction, have been destroyed by it? Because, as I said, abstraction is a form of intellection. And realists are usually thinkers, as we saw from the panel. These

are not ignorant people. Gerhartz and Franzen are not some red-state dummies who never read any book but the Bible. All the panelists are well-educated and well-spoken people. They have read and thought a lot about technique, which turns out to be part of the problem. They may even have read *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, but these are left-brainers. I know because I am one, too. I know what they should have resisted, because I have had to resist it myself. The left-brain is domineering and wants to take over everything. Your only hope is to give it the very important job of protecting the right-brain, in which case it feels important, like an older brother. You can then use the left-brain to limit itself.

Another cause for the dissolving of these artists by the time they are 40 is their suppression of the right side. All the things they dislike me for—temper, anger, sharp opinion, free emotion, pride—are right-brain or inner brain things (although you won't read that in Betty Edwards). They come from passion. If you reign them in like a proper modern person, you also repress the right side. This is how painters from previous centuries avoiding dissolving, even though they were very intelligent left-brainers. These painters were passionate. They were hot-tempered. They were opinionated. They were often what we would now call egomaniacs. This kept the right side strong, and allowed it to fight back against the left side and the super-ego.

But the new realist is the victim of a double or triple attack. Being a realist artist in a time of *laissez faire*, he or she is already left-brain. The left-brain is then strengthened by the information saturation of the culture, while the right-brain is debilitated by materialism, phony and shallow spiritualism, and constant exhortations to humility and equality. Then we add the pressure from the gallery to fill quotas, match sofas, and not offend anyone. Under these circumstances, the realist artist can talk about the spiritual in life all he wants, but he is very unlikely to have experienced much of it. What he experiences in art, day to day, is technique. And so technique becomes overgrown, hypertrophied, like an athlete on steroids. And, just as with the athlete on steroids, this gain at the expense of unseen losses leads to accelerated burn-out.

The parallels continue, because just like other modern personalities, unbalanced by culture, the realist artist, facing such a burn-out, often decides to turn the flame up still higher. Or, rather than turn around and dry out, the artist forges on ahead ever faster, taking more of the drug that has damaged him. And so we see Quang Ho [moving to abstract painting](#), as one example. He is sick of the same old realism, so “try something else” he thinks. But if it was too much abstraction that destroyed his love of realism, how can he fix that with *more* abstraction? If we study Ho's career, we see the image literally dissolving before our eyes. Abstraction is taking over, the painting becoming more and more an *idea* of technique. As Dan McCaw was moving from Sorolla to Bonnard to Francis Bacon, Ho was moving from Sargent to Vuillard and now to Cy Twombly or Lee Krasner. It appears to me to be a pathology, one that can be broken only by intervention. He needs to go back to his roots. He needs to sit in front of that portrait of his sister with sunflowers—one of his greatest works—and remember how he felt then, about her and about painting. He needs a big ambitious project, one that has nothing to do with galleries, teaching, or the market, a project for himself alone. A project that will test and stretch his abilities.

That is what we all need, and when I say a project that will test us, I don't just mean that will test our technical abilities. I mean a project that will test our ability to *create*. There has been far too little of that in realism, and whether the galleries, clients or museums demand it is not to the point. The point is that is what art *is*.

I will be told that artists like Ho and McCaw are just growing, while we others are stunted. Just as art

history grew up, these realists are growing up. As we see, these artists are following the same *progression* as 20th century art, so that must mean they are *progressing*, right? Only if you buy the idea that 20th century art was a progression, and I don't. I think it is clear it was a regression. [Nietzsche predicted it](#), Picasso confirmed it, and we see the fruits with our own eyes. We can see where it led because we are here, living in the age of the Lastman. It led to [a zeroing out of art](#), a complete nullification of every artistic virtue. The only thing left for Ho and McCaw is to go conceptual, and to begin exhibiting their dirty underwear. Then they may finally make it into the upper echelons.

I don't take any of this lightly, because it scares me. It scares me to see the top realists self-destructing. It scares me both personally and impersonally. It scares me impersonally because I care about art history and the current health of realism. It scares me personally because I see the danger outside my own door. I see it taking my colleagues and acquaintances down one by one, and I wonder how long I can last. I have avoided burn-out so far by painting less and shunning the market, but is that enough? Do I need to flee to the Marquesas, get rid of my phone and refrigerator, grow a long beard and quit bathing? What is one to do? Me, I write to sort through it, for myself if no one else. If everyone else finds this intolerable, at least I will have reminded myself of something. For I started out by saying I didn't understand what went wrong with Dan Gerhartz. I now know more than I did a couple of hours ago, and it may prevent me from going where I don't want to go in the future. That is a pretty good afternoon's work.