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ADAM GOPNIK
and
JACOB COLLINS

by Miles Mathis



Reclining Nude Morning Jacob Collins 2011

Adam Gopnik wrote [an article](#) on Jacob Collins in June of this year (2011) for the *New Yorker*. Gopnik was too unsure of his thesis to put Jacob's name in the title—or even a subtitle—but that is what it was about. Now, I have already written five long papers on art this month, but this was so important I rushed home from the library and leapt immediately upon the computer, the bulk of the article already written in my head as I rode home on my bicycle. I say library, because I only read magazines when I get a hot tip, and I only read them at the library, washing my hands as soon as I get home. But this one was worth the bike ride.

Like Robert Hughes, about whom I just wrote [two papers](#), Gopnik is a prominent art critic who is now making tentative steps back to realism. Gopnik's steps are much newer and more tentative than Hughes, but it is very good sign regardless.

Both Gopnik and Collins say some astonishing things in this article. The most important thing Gopnik says is this:

I would mistrust a poetry critic who couldn't produce a rhyming couplet. Could one write about art with no idea how to draw?

Someone has spoken two sentences of sense, at long last! This is important not only because it is true,

and because it has an obvious answer (NO), but because it comes from Gopnik, who has not only been cheerleading for Modernism all his life but also slandering realism. This is not the first time I have written about Gopnik, or quoted him. In one of my most important early writings, [“A Letter from the Artist”](#)—written in the early 90's and published by Art Renewal Center in 2003—I mention this quote of Gopnik, also from the *New Yorker*:

Renaissance illusion had become illustration and could be sustained only by government diktat, as in socialist realism, or by commercial cynicism, as in *Saturday Evening Post* covers.

I responded,

Gopnik confirms Greenberg's “purifying” inventions from 1949 and none the wiser. In letting stand this 50-year-old slander, Gopnik matches Greenberg's presumption without his courage. For he gores an ox that is now assumed to be hornless. Gopnik knows, or thinks he knows, that no one now gives a damn about art except those for whom it is politically expedient. Modern art is expedient for artists who cannot draw or paint or sculpt. And it is expedient for writers who require a language-based art: successful visual art does not require their help or goodwill. And it is expedient for vendors and buyers of art who have no eye and no soul, and who must rely therefore on reputation. And so “realism” has become an easy target at the end of the century. One need not even be coherent in discussing it anymore. Parrot the proper shibboleths and one is a progressive intellectual. In one sentence, Gopnik, parroting Greenberg, whittles object painting down to “illusion,” then to illustration, and finally to commerce.

Apparently by summer of 2011 Gopnik no longer stood by that slur, but I have not seen him retract it or any of the others. If Gopnik believed his own new words, upon finding himself unable to draw or to understand drawing, he would have publicly renounced art criticism and found other things to write so beautifully about.

Yes, I said beautifully. Gopnik is a craftsman in his own field and should stick to it. Instead, he uses the rest of the article to backtrack and blow more smoke. Early on he asks, “Why was I unable to do something so painfully simple?” The obvious answer is, “because it is not painfully simple, or simple at all.” He makes this clear in the rest of the article, but won't admit it. He just falls back into denial. Later in the article he claims that drawing is like all other things: it is something anyone can learn with effort. But he gives us no evidence of that. Just because he made some minor progress doesn't mean he learned to draw. He could sit in Jacob's class every moment for the rest of his life, and he would still never be able to draw like Jacob. Why? It's a little niggling thing called talent, that the Moderns have wanted to legislate against but that they haven't been able to wipe out of the gene code (or wherever it exists).

The most important thing Jacob says in the article is this:

Why is beauty less interesting to you than journalism?

Wow, did that leap off the page! The perfect response to Gopnik's question about relevance. Gopnik was asking the question we always get: why not paint “everyday life,” including the iphones and laptops and plastic backpacks? This has been the mistaken idea of realism since Theodore Dreiser, hell, since Flaubert and Zola: that “realism” was something to do with unedited reality. But Whistler had an answer for that in the 1880's (art is selection) and Collins has an equally strong answer now. Art is not the visual analog of journalism. Even though Gopnik is writing this article and is doing his usual bang-up job at polishing his own head, it is Collins who comes off as the more interesting art critic. It

is Collins who comes off as the expert. It is Collins who comes off as the genuine article.

Of course the answer is, we would expect journalism to be more interesting to a journalist and beauty to be more interesting to an artist. Which means journalists should write about journalism and artists should write about art.

Speaking of which, in their little discussion of what to call “realism,” Jacob makes his only minor stumble, and it may be due to what Gopnik called his “diffidence.” We get a roly-poly suggestion of “traditionalism” and then “revivalism,” both of which stink. Real art isn't a going-back, it is a being. The fact that our art looks like pre-Modern art isn't due to any revival or reversion, it is due to the simple fact that both are real art. This is what real art *is*. The reason that real artists have had so much trouble tagging their own field is that the answer already existed and was obvious. You don't need to call it pastiche (as Odd Nerdrum did, to his everlasting infamy), or slow art (as Hughes did—it doesn't have to be slow). Just call it art. The term was stolen from us and we just need to steal it back. It is the Moderns that should have come up with a new term, since what they were doing wasn't what had always been called art. They were doing visual theory or visual politics or visual propaganda or visual theft. We are doing art.

Speaking of diffidence, I have to take on Jacob's wife for just a moment. At the beginning of the article we see her shushing Jacob at a dinner party, to be sure he remains diffident. This struck home with me of course, since I am always being kicked under the table by my parents or girlfriends. But Jacob and his wife should learn an important lesson from this article, which is that people are interested in what he has to say, even when or especially when it is contrarian. We can see that even Gopnik, supposedly a staunch supporter of Modernism, was hungry for Jacob's words. When he didn't get them at the dinner party, he ended up seeking them out, spending many of his precious hours searching for them. And, finally, he puts those words in the top magazine in the country. Don't let yourself be shushed, Jacob! We don't need you to be quieter, we need you to be noisier.

Toward the end of the article, Gopnik says that he finds it strange that in his previous writings he should have been “trying to write skillfully about the purposefully skill-less.” Another tall truth jumping from the *New Yorker* and leaving it in tatters. So stop doing it, Adam. If you must write about art, write about real artists, and next time put their names in the title where they belong.

When you do, you may want to consider more carefully the whole cardplayer, kibbitzer analogy you used in this article. Because Jacob is fairly successful [he just had [a big show at Adelson](#) in New York, where he sold 30 of 44 pieces, some for quite high prices], you may not understand the debased place of real art in the current game. You imply the kibbitzers deserve a place at the table as well, since they make the game more interesting. But this misses the point of the entire 20th century, and the last decade as well: the kibbitzers took over *all* the tables in the casino and drove the cardplayers out. Jacob is one of the first cardplayers that has climbed back into the game since Andrew Wyeth played a few hands back in the 70's, and Jacob is still in a minor game in a far smoky corner away from the big bettors. By apologizing for the kibbitzers, you play the “they have rights, too” hand, but that inverts the direction of the unfairness. It is not the kibbitzers that are endangered, it is the cardplayers. You don't need to apologize for the kibbitzers; to be of any use, you need to promote the cardplayers wildly.

We can see this most efficiently by looking at the major museums in New York City. Jacob will never get a show at the Whitney or Guggenheim or MOMA or the Armory or the New Museum, and you will say that is because they are Modern. Yes, but where *will* Jacob get a show? Don't tell me the Metropolitan. I have just [shown](#) that no artist has gotten a show there since Andrew Wyeth, in 1977

(under Hoving!). Next, let us look at the galleries. Adelson is a fine gallery, but they can't compete with Pace or Gagosian and so on in terms of press or price. And that brings us to critics. Hughes and Gopnik have made small nods to art, but they have not embraced a real artist yet. To see what I mean, ask yourself why Gopnik didn't just do a positive review of Collins' show at Adelson. Modernism is still the beneficiary of incredible amounts of (free?) press, but Gopnik feels he has to be embarrassed to like Collins. Not only can Gopnik *not* promote Collins in any direct way, he has to turn the article by the end to apologize for the Modern kibbitzers. It is as if he is afraid he will be fired or marginalized if he tells more truth than he has already told. He can hide a few revolutionary quotes in the article as long as he can explain to the masters afterwards that his thesis is still pro-Modern. These masters can hardly read anyway, as they have proved by publishing Schjeldahl and Danto and Saltz and Hickey, so the danger is small. But they *wouldn't* miss someone actually promoting an alternative to them.

Unfortunately, Gopnik is right in this, as we have seen from the marginalizing of Robert Hughes in the last decade. Hughes is pretty much *persona non grata* in New York, even without embracing a real artist. Despite that, the only hope of honest people everywhere is a full frontal assault. Unless they want to lose all self respect, Hughes and Gopnik can only move forward, and they must move forward with assurance, not with diffidence and embarrassment. The same thing applies to Collins. This article of Gopnik has made him a target, and a little more success will make him a conspicuous target. His opposition can spot weakness like a shark can spot blood in the water, and he had better be prepared. The next steps from here will either be a sharp rise to a big victory or a sad flight to Chadds Ford.