

The many masks of modern art

Excellence in art is difficult to pin down. It can take the form of exquisite craftsmanship, or blatantly direct expression. Refer to forms or to ideas, innovation or tradition. It can result from a brilliant insight, or a life long dedication to an ideal. Or it can mean nothing more than that something is extremely well done.

I prefer to view artistic excellence in rather general terms, as representing an overall high level of quality, and as the adherence by an artist to high, broadly based creative standards.

Now, I'm fully aware that discussing standards in art is unpopular today — that we feel the application of standards limits art's freedom, curtails its ability to roam the unknown, and too often defines it in the light of the art of the past.

This is only true, however, if we establish purely formal or technical standards, or insist that our art repeat or echo the great art of the past. It is *not* true if our standards reflect the levels of achievement and the quality of the ideals of previous art. Such standards can only challenge us to fulfill ourselves, and to outdo whatever was done in the past.

Standards should help us achieve our very best, in whatever way is appropriate, and not cause us to imitate the manner of anyone else. They should be dynamic, not rigid, and address themselves to quality and growth, and not to technical ideals.

Art should inspire us to be ourselves, not to become second hand Old Masters. What matters is quality and truth, and honesty of expression, things we all can achieve on our own terms, and on our own levels. We should set our goals and standards on the basis of what we feel, sense, and know is true, and not on the basis of technical skills demonstrated by an Old Master, or by someone who "taught" us how to draw. If our natural proclivities lead us to draw like Ingres, or to paint like Manet, well and good. But if they lead us back to pictorial basics, to the dot, square, circle, and line, that is acceptable as well.

Whatever we do, we should be true to ourselves, and to our own sense of what is right. Challenging the Old Masters, after all, is not appropriate for us all.

Jerome Witkin, a representational painter just barely at mid-career, is one of the very small handful of American painters, however, for whom it is appropriate. His talents and painterly skills are such that he can challenge the Old Masters at their own game. But, just as important, he is one of the even smaller handful of contemporary representational painters sufficiently concerned with modernist ideas, attitudes, and realities to stand on an even footing with our better modernist painters.

Witkin is a superb draftsman, an excellent painter, and an artist with something important to say. Although strictly representational, his art was forged by the fire of



Courtesy, Museum of Art, The Pennsylvania State University

'Jeff Davies' (1980): Oil on canvas by Jerome Witkin

Abstract Expressionism, as well as by the art of the Old Masters. His paintings, as a result, have a passionate directness and warmth not encountered in most of the cooler figurative paintings produced by his contemporaries during the past fifteen years.

Of the Old Masters, I suspect Rubens would have understood him best. Not only because of Witkin's painterly and compositional fluidity, but also because of

his earthy directness. Witkin not only knows how to paint real men and women, he also knows how to move them about, and to relate them to things and events on his canvas in ways that in less talented hands would only lead to compositional clutter.

He also has exceptional narrative skills. In his huge triptych *Death as an Usher: Germany, 1933*, inspired by accounts of Nazi brutality, he created an unforgettable image of twentieth-century man at his worst.

And in *The Devil as a Tailor*, in which the devil is depicted sewing outfits for soldiers and victims alike, his depiction of evil, while a bit more oblique, is no less acidic. Among the fiendish "tailors" completed outfits is a black suit pinned with the yellow star which the Nazis used to identify those of Jewish birth.

Jeff Davies, on the other hand, is a straight-forward depiction of a single human being. And of a bulky, no-nonsense, and aggressively physical one to boot. Yet Witkin portrays him with such directness and candor that we cannot help but feel sympathetic toward him.

This painting is a masterly performance, and a superb demonstration of how draftsmanship and paint can combine to create form and character. In it, every line, tone, texture, and hue contributes to the whole. Although a rigidly central image, pictorial interest is maintained by subtle changes between right and left. The main drama of the picture, for instance, hinges on the subtle distinction between the one eye almost shut, and the other only slightly more open. And the manner in which the top edges of the two sides of the coat collar echo and underscore that distinction.

It's a subtle touch, but just enough to bring everything else into focus. And just the sort of thing that separates the exceptional artist from the merely accomplished one.

There are other little touches that contribute to this painting's excellence: the subtle alteration of texture and tone in the upper background; the manner in which the curve of the table top and of the plate upon it repeat and anchor the curve of the cap and of the shoulders; the clever way light is distributed to suggest volume; and, last but not least, the manner in which the portion of the cap over the subject's right ear was deftly dashed off.

All these effects contribute toward, but do not explain, the excellence of this work. For that, many other things have to be taken into account, including Witkin's deeply humanistic vision of art, his study and understanding of both older and recent art, and his dedication to the highest possible artistic ideals and standards.

To those, of course, must be added extraordinary talent and discipline, a lively imagination, fine sensibilities — and the fact that he genuinely cares about the theme of man in art.

In a recent letter he wrote: "Why have we forbidden the human presence in our art? Are we so diminished in our pride of ourselves that we can't deal with our vision? Somehow, an art without man is a joyless thing, and therefore, the twentieth century seems embarrassed before the art of other cultures and times. We've chosen to be *Formal* instead of truly *Human*."

Theodore F. Wolff

Nightwalkers in the city surf

As the wind weaves silent patterns of frothy surf between the concrete city shores, it mingles those walkers of the city night — who tread early morning asphalt paths seeking solace around the streetlights — forming a silent and solitary cadre of the street that traverses loneliness.

One such walker breaks his peopled fast to answer a passing cabbie's question, (Twenty after two, mac,) the wind catches his eye with a silent surge of city surf. Squinting, his tears soften the scattered

glare of streetlights into the spoked glory of a friendlier country night.

He pauses, turns, and begins to look for similar stars hidden beneath the surface, needing only the compassion of tears to reveal themselves.

The other walkers of the night continue their pursuit of answers as the wind blows one questioner nearer home.

Stewart Levin