

## The Young and the Restless: Delia Brown, Will Cotton, Tim Gardner, Hilary Harkness, and Damian Loeb

By Charles Giuliano

In the hierarchy of taste and culture, genre, or scenes of everyday life has never earned the respect of other forms of art. Compared to the classical painters of the Italian Renaissance, Raphael, Leonardo, Botticelli, and Michelangelo, the Northern European Renaissance masters of genre, Breugel and Bosch, just never seem to earn the same level of adulation or respect. Frans Hals, the 17th century Dutch Master of portraits and genre scenes, is often discussed as dumbing down his work to appeal to the new bourgeois patron.

The Dutch nouveau riche client, wealthy through trade or speculation in the commodities markets, wasn't sophisticated or educated enough for the classical iconography of the Italian Masters who served the aesthetic needs of the Church or Old Money patrons steeped in learning. The clients for the genre paintings of Northern Europe were the great unwashed by then swathed in fur and velvet and looking for a portrait, landscape, genre painting or still life to stick over the sofa. Because these categories of painting, compared to unraveling classical mythology or religious iconography, were relative no brainers. It didn't require sophistication or education to appreciate and enjoy, and most importantly to acquire, these new categories of art popularized in the Golden Age of Dutch art.

So the genre painter, however skilled, and clearly Breugel, Bosch, Hals, or Jan Steen, are very great Masters, have never quite earned the same level of respect accorded to high brow classicists.

Some of these ancient attitudes and prejudices have been unleashed in the mixed critical and curatorial responses to a remarkable young generation of enormously talented genre painters. Of course, the public adores these new artists and collectors have enthusiastically whipped out their check books. Instead of responding to the drop dead talent and lushness of these artists, mostly in their late 20s and 30s, there has been much carping and even hissy fits, ultra catty infighting and pissing contests, outrageous and undignified ad hominem attacks. Not just snide and sly remarks at openings and art parties, or in obscure journals, but in the pages of the New York Times, Art in America, Newsweek, Artnet and other highly respected publications by critics from whom one should clearly expect more.

It has been open season not only on these artists, their physical appearance, manner of dress and lifestyle, which seems to get as much attention as their actual work, but also against individuals who are associated with them professionally.

Writing about Damian Loeb and Will Cotton, Newsweek critic, Peter Plagens, himself an artist who should show a little more restraint and class, skewered Mary Boone, the dealer for these artists. "Boone, the diminutive, raven-haired gallery owner with a turned up nose right off those, 'Draw me and win a scholarship,' matchbook covers, practically invented today's contemporary art world- the moneyed, fashion conscious and entertaining one that replaced the old, grungy, hermetic oneHer

artist luncheons at the Odeon restaurant in Tribeca seemed to get as much attention from the critics as her SoHo gallery's exhibitions did-which was a lot."

Perhaps Plagens is pissed that Mary never invited him to lunch. So arguably this is pay back for some slight real or imagined. Or just a chance to take her down a peg. Which may indeed be excessive and abusive as he already describes her as, "diminutive." No, she has never invited me to lunch either. Although, once, when she was in Boston for an opening, she was rather nice to me. Chatted me up by striding over and saying, "Hi, I'm Mary Boone." As if I didn't know that. It made my day. Actually most of the art dealers hardly give me the time of day, because, after all, I live in Boston. They even hide the wine and cheese as well as the women and children when I stride into their openings. But that's OK. Boston is a nice place to live because nobody sucks up, even to critics.

Having wasted Boone, and her nose, good heavens, can you believe that discussing a dealer's nose, in of all places, Newsweek, he reloaded a double barrel to blast at Loeb and Cotton. "Since we're dealing with two young-guy artists, the hoped-for parallel might be the way that Johnny Depp and Matt Damon are, at the same time, both teen-dream material and really good actors. The problem here is that Cotton and Loeb come off much more like artist's equivalents of Freddie Prinze, Jr. and Pauly Shore." He also tells us that Loeb is a high school dropout and is, "something of a hunk, shows up at everybody's parties (and in everybody's published party photographs); he's regularly mentioned in the Gotham gossip mills like the New York Post's page six."

What is ironic is that Plagens is writing for the kind of general readership that, given the chance, would just love the paintings of Loeb and Cotton. Perhaps that's what inspired him to foul his nest. A nasty trait associated only with humans. It's the kind of idiotic opinion one expects from Hilton Kramer and Robert Hughes erudite, but ultra conservative, self indulgent blowhards who like their own smell.

Thinking about the new genre painting started last fall during a round of Chelsea galleries. At D'Amelio Terras I encountered a series of seductive and smart water colors by a California artist, Delia Brown. I immediately recognized them from a spread of illustrations in the Sunday magazine of the New York Times. The lifestyle, fashion, and self-absorbed posing that is unique to her images of the young and the restless is an important part of their appeal. They reflect a hip, laid back, El Lay pool party culture of bare breasted women, sunbathing, sipping champagne and smoking endless cigarettes. They constitute a Left Coast version of Sex in the City. The images evoked menopausal nostalgia for my bygone rock and roll years and decadent lifestyle.

The experience of Brown's smart and hip, superbly technical paintings opened my eyes to other exponents of what I come to regard as the new genre painting.

An encounter with the double header, uptown and downtown, shows of Loeb and Cotton, later in the season, blew me away. Don't listen to the critics. These guys can paint. I love the horizontal format of Loeb how they stretch out and command a vast expanse of wall, and yet draw you in to intimately examine that narrow, slotted vision, its dark side, and implied mystery. It was only later that I read that the images were based on movie stills. That makes perfect sense as they have a cinematic, narrative quality. And the huge confections of Cotton ratcheted up my blood sugar to dangerous levels.

Actually Cotton's work reminded me a lot of Jim Rosequist, who I briefly worked for as a studio assistant, way back in the 1960s. It is interesting that only now does Jim seem to be coming into his own with critics and artists. Jeff Koons, for example, based on recent work, should be charged with criminal trespass. Think about all that spaghetti and tires. How Golden Age Dutch. Rosenquist is the

Old Master of genre painting. Of the major Pop artists he was the only no brainer which is what I loved about him.

Add to this mix, Tim Gardner, and Hilary Harkness, who fits this theme but whose work I have seen only in reproduction. Looking at Gardner at 303 Gallery immediately reminded me of Delia. The aspects of Men Are from Mars and Women Are From Venus thing just popped out at me. Tim's work is a guy thing and Delia's is a girl thing. And Harkness, well, that's another trip. She does claustrophobic, fetish, voyeuristic little paintings of girl sailors getting it on in their skivvies below deck.

The tiny watercolors by Gardner, meticulously rendered, are copied deadpan from color snapshots supplied by family and friends. We view guys hanging out drinking beer and doing general guy stuff like whooping it up in Vegas, beer in hand, under the neon marquee of the Flamingo.

What's most fascinating about these young artists is their upside. None of them have necessarily peaked or even hit their stride. Their pursuit of technical painting and narrative takes years to develop to its full potential. More than likely these artists will be on the scene for a long time. So the critics had better get used to them. Living well is the best revenge. Maybe it's all about jealousy.

In Art in America, for example, in a review that came out months after the exhibition, Edward Leffingwell was particularly bitchy to Delia Brown. This is surprising as AiA reviews are mostly boringly descriptive and never seem to say anything bad about anybody.

"Her work seems to be about life at its most superficial," Leffingwell wrote. "It holds a mirror to the people who lend themselves to its creation, with cell phones, sunglasses, and ridiculous flutes of second tier champagne among their secondary sexual characteristics. Her high-concept serving of vanity fair is not without intellectual pretension." And on and on. But you get the idea. I love that bit about second-tier champagne, as if the critic, based on what AiA paid him for that review, celebrated by knocking back a bottle of Dom Perignon. From the way he writes he must drink Cold Duck and Mr. Andre.

So just what is all this crap about the noses of art dealers, who wore what where, and what brand of bubbly an artist uses as a prop in her illustrative paintings. Are these uptight critics broadcasting that they have, like, better taste than the rest of us? Genre painting isn't about paintings with taste, but, rather, paintings that taste good. Like those luscious high calorie Cotton creations. What eye candy. Mange.