



TODAY'S
MASTERS

BY PETER TRIPPI

FLACKISM: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN AUDREY FLACK AND ROBERT STORR

Editor's Note: In New York City, Hollis Taggart Galleries has opened the exhibition *Audrey Flack: Master Drawings from Crivelli to Pollock (April 20–May 26)*. This project features 34 recent works reflecting Flack's lifelong passion for artworks of the past, which she re-envisioned in fresh, highly personal ways. The accompanying catalogue contains an essay by Robert C. Morgan and a conversation with John Wilmerding. This March Flack enjoyed another lively dialogue about her latest works with the renowned artist and curator Robert Storr, most recently dean of the Yale University School of Art (2006–16). Below is a distillation of their dialogue as it related to the artworks illustrated here. A full transcription will appear in a separate booklet available in the future.

Audrey Flack (b. 1931) is a painter, sculptor, printmaker, teacher, author, lecturer, feminist, and artists' advocate. She grew up in New York City and studied fine art at Cooper Union and Yale, as well as art history at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. In the 1950s she painted alongside the leading Abstract Expressionists, but shifted toward New Realism and then pioneered the genre of Photorealism. In 1966 hers was the first Photorealist painting acquired for the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection. Flack stopped painting for 36 years in order to focus on sculpture, primarily monumentally scaled female figures such as *Civitas: The Four Visions* (1991) in Rock Hill, South Carolina, and *Veritas* (2007) in Tampa. Throughout that period, Flack continued drawing after the Old Masters, explaining that "when you copy a master, you see things you never knew." Last year marked her welcome return to painting.

Information: Hollis Taggart Galleries, 521 West 26th Street, 7th floor, New York, NY 10001, 212.628.4000, hollistaggart.com. Flack's *Art & Soul: Notes on Creating* (1986) is in its 12th printing (Penguin Books). Special thanks to Ashley Park.





(OPPOSITE PAGE) AUDREY FLACK (b. 1931), *Pollock's Cans*, 2016, mixed media on paper, 40 x 32 in. (ABOVE) CARLO CRIVELLI (active by 1457–1495), *Pietà*, 1476, tempera on wood with a gold ground, 28 1/4 x 25 3/8 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 13.178

FROM CRIVELLI TO POLLOCK

Audrey Flack [AF]: Carlo Crivelli was a 15th-century Venetian painter and I am in love with him — have been since I was 14, when I first saw his work at the Met ... my heart went “Ah.” I wanted a reproduction of his Pietà but his work was in no book, so I saved my allowance and ordered a black-and-white photograph for \$7.

Crivelli suspended swags of fruit from the tops of his paintings; he especially loved cucumbers. Recently there was a Crivelli exhibition at the Gardner Museum in Boston, then at the Walters in Baltimore, where I saw it. Unfortunately a lot of the good paintings were already gone, but there was a predella of the Last Supper which I had never seen. It was a small painting and when I looked closely, I was stunned. “This is too much,” I said, “this is wild. The saints are feeding each other cucumbers.”

A month later someone introduced me to an Old Masters dealer, and I told him, “I just saw the most incredible pickle painting.” It turns out that he had authenticated it! His name is Robert Simon, and we proceeded to share our love of Crivelli — he even named his dog Carlo Crivelli. My computer password was Carlo Crivelli. When you love Crivelli, you belong to a cult; there is no one like him.

[Flack points to *Pollock's Cans*.] So underneath this Pietà [based on the Metropolitan's Crivelli] are Pollock's paint cans. Did you know that he used a turkey baster and some sort of squeegee? You see these red bulbs?

RS: Yes.

AF: I didn't know that he used them until I drew them.

RS: He didn't use it for dripping, like pastry syringes.



(ABOVE) AUDREY FLACK (b. 1931), *Fiat Lux*, 2017, acrylic on canvas with 22-karat white and yellow gold leaf and sparkles, 83 x 83 in. (AT LEFT) CHRISTOFFEL JEGHER (1596–1652/53) after Peter Paul Rubens, *The Garden of Love*, 1630s, woodcut on paper, 18 1/4 x 23 3/4 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 30.53.17a



RS: The Crown of Thorns.

AF: Yes, he did! He was controlling his drips. We know that he controlled it this way [Flack moves her arms imitating Pollock's movements], but I didn't know that he wanted that much accuracy.

I've got a new theory, Rob. It happened while I was copying Crivelli. I began to notice a heavy outline ... heavier than I thought. That's exactly why Crivelli was denigrated, because Caravaggio came along with chiaroscuro and supposedly that's advanced. Linear painting was suddenly considered old-fashioned.

RS: Crivelli's without atmosphere.

AF: Yes, so he was labeled old-fashioned, decorative, ornamental, and left out by Giorgio Vasari, out of art history. I think Crivelli's modernist. He uses a heavy outline to define form.

Oh, by the way, that wreath...

AF: Yes, that green Crown of Thorns is a cucumber vine. This guy is too much. Look at this heavy outline ... heavy and unbroken. Having dealt with Cézanne's broken line for so many years, I couldn't quite bring myself to do it. It took several tries.

RS: Those tears are almost relief elements, the way they're drawn. In fact, in Crivelli's pictures there are almost reliefs, too, and in your *Macarena of Miracles* painting [a work by Flack in the Metropolitan Museum], you have actual glass tears. That's great.

LET THERE BE LIGHT

AF: I love the Old Masters. I believe that everything is new, and nothing is new. There are a lot of great works and artists that have never been acknowledged; many are new and innovative.

I came across this print by Christoffel Jegher. I fell in love with this unknown printmaker and I like



(AT RIGHT) AUDREY FLACK (b. 1931), *St. Teresa*, 2011, charcoal and pastel on paper, 18 1/2 x 13 1/2 in. (ABOVE) GIAN LORENZO BERNINI (1598–1680), *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, 1647–52, marble, life-size, Church of Santa Maria delle Vittoria, Rome

his print after Rubens's *Garden of Love* almost better than the original painting.

RS: So if *Fiat Lux* is a homage to anybody, it's to him, not to Rubens?

AF: Yes! I'm fascinated by how he takes pink cheeks, vermillion and blue gowns, and translates them into black-and-white line. I started painting here on the left side, probably terrified I was going to destroy the canvas. I painted this woman and the one next to her. Then I saw she is holding a dust mop; it could also be referred to as a tickler. This is the back of this guy's head, the back of his hair, his curls, he's leaning on his hand.

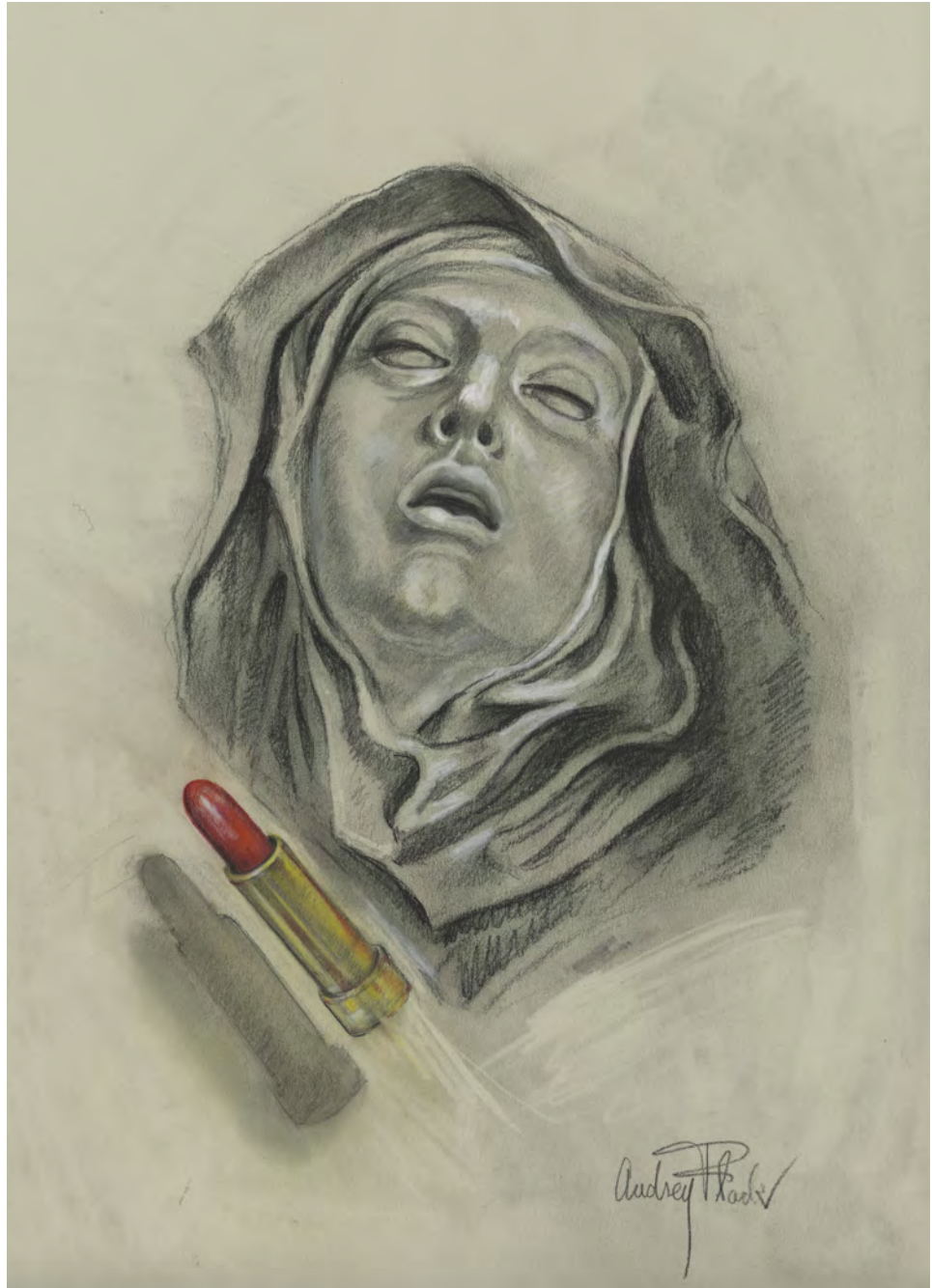
RS: Yes, and his other hand is up her dress. It's *The Garden of Love*, what can we say? [Laughter]

AF: Ha — she's pulling her skirt up to help him. This woman is looking lovingly at that one, suggesting a lesbian relationship. Here's a particularly sexy little putto.

RS: Yes, he is really about ready to dive. [Laughter]

AF: And he is exposing his bare bottom, and this one ... she's the observer.

RS: She is not only the observer, but she is looking at you saying, "OK, what are you looking at?"



AF: And that is Supergirl shattering the glass ceiling with bars of gold, surrounded by silver beams of light.

AF: Early on, I looked at Dürer, and I copied all of Holbein's *Dance of Death* series when I was at Yale. I have a whole sketchbook filled with them. They are all heavily outlined. This is my theory: Dürer, Holbein, Schongauer, Bruegel — they were all comic book illustrators.

RS: In many ways. I think they're graphic novelists.

AF: They outlined everything and they knew that to make a figure stand out, they'd make that line heavier. So my outline started getting stronger. We were taught, "Don't look at illustrators — they are beneath you." And there were the Abstract Express-

sionists, with no line, except Kline always fighting with the line.

RS: Except for Gorky, who was trained (as was de Kooning) to be a letterer, and they would use stripper brushes, which gave that wonderful tapering line Gorky has. It's similar to the kind of line you get in engravings because the burin rises and falls, swells and contracts according to how much weight put on it. A lot of cartoonists I know are really interested in 17th and 18th-century engraving, and they could give a sh-t about modern art. It's a sensibility and also a craft, and you, Audrey, are interested in craft in ways which very few contemporary artists are. Not just skills; skill is what you have, craft is the way it is done. Engraving is definitely a craft and—

AF: And skill is what?

RS: Skill has more to do with what your capacities are. You can choose a craft in which you have more or less skill. It's a bit like the Olympics: diving has a degree of difficulty and a degree of performance; divers are graded on both. People who choose easy dives make a very high performance score, but you choose the very difficult things to do. As does Chuck [Close].

AF: Is that crazy?

RS: Most people who choose such difficult things do it in the interest of a very conservative art. They wish to do as the Old Masters did, in order to retrieve or revive. To do the same things without that being the motive, to make contemporary work instead, with other motives and inflections, that's why you're an artist and not just a traditionalist.

AF: These questions about craft and skill are very much in the air right now and are affecting our culture.

RS: If you go to the American Academy [in Chicago] or the National Academy [New York], any of those places, there are dozens of artists with enormous skill. What they are trying to do is bring back the good old days of art, as it was before.

AF: Or the Florence Academy.

RS: It's an oddly vain effort, and it's kind of sad. Because all of these people with so much going for them technically can't think how to make actual art. The challenge is to use old techniques to make something utterly of its time, and you do that, Audrey. You do it by going straight at the taboos of high modernism, which are kitsch, camp, and extravagant narration.

AF: I think you've seen a larger picture. It's the first time I've heard anyone delineate the academic skills from contemporary art.

RS: I make very simple abstract paintings, nothing remotely like this. But I have looked a lot at this work. I have looked at historical precedent, and I am interested in somebody who can really go with it. I can appreciate what other people can do that I cannot, or am not inclined to. I think one of the big problems of the scene coming out of the modernist era was that you had to have all of your interests and activities lined up strictly in a row. One of the great things about the Francis Picabia show [on view at the Museum of Modern Art this past winter] was: this was a guy all over the lot. Some of his work was in horrendous taste, but he was totally in control of it. Some is enormously tasteful, but he did what it occurred to him to do, the way that was required by the circumstances. A consistent aesthetic was of no interest to him.

AF: Me, too. And I don't think you are so interested in consistent aesthetics.



AUDREY FLACK (b. 1931), *Cupcake Angel*, 2016, prismacolor and pastel on paper, 44 x 34 in.

RS: Point is, you can be affected by a great many things and make work that doesn't look like it.

AF: Absolutely. *Fiat Lux* was affected by my AbEx roots. The picture plane is tilted up, objects extend to the edges, like Pollock and all those guys. None of the Photorealists did that. My picture plane is straight up, I am always thinking abstractly.

RS: It's turbulent; you let things flow into one another, in all kinds of ways that have to do with brushmarks, except here they aren't brushmarks.

AF: When I was at Yale, Bernie Chaet was my instructor and adviser; he had not yet heard of Jackson Pollock. My thesis was called "The change from space to depth: From Giotto to Jackson Pollock." I described how, over time, the picture plane gradu-

ally tilted up. Cézanne tilts his table up until you get to cubism, and then you get a cubist shadow box space. After that, Pollock punctured holes in the picture plane.

But I made a painting that caused trouble with [my Yale instructor Josef] Albers. I made a grid, aligned a grid, the squares measured about two or three inches. Albers came into my studio and he must have thought, "I got her. She's painting squares." Before that I had been throwing and dripping paint. When he saw the painting, he got very excited, and that's when he tried to feel me — I don't know the polite word.

RS: Grope.

AF: Grope, thank you. [Laughter] Maybe it was the grid of squares that excited him. I didn't want to upset or disillusion him as he expounded on the

importance of the square, so I stayed quiet, but while he was talking and gesturing with one hand, his other hand started to move up between my legs and when it got too far up and hit the right spot, I jumped up and knocked over the chair. I couldn't believe what was happening; the great Josef Albers was a leech. That was it! We never spoke again.

That painting was exactly what you described, Rob. My intent was to direct space. The grid established the median plane and I wanted to put paint in back of the grid and in front of it, to control that dynamic of space, to create excitement within the vibration.

RS: Today when I talk with students in this way, they say "that's formalist" like it's a bad thing. Yet formalism is actually really exciting and vast; you can read the formalism of a Rubens or Indian miniature or Pollock, you name it. If you really read that as a drama of the play of forces, it makes things come alive. The action is in the way in which forms come together or fall apart.

With your fragmented planes, which could have come out of an Al Held painting, you've basically taken the codes for comic book drama and inserted them into a Baroque picture, where similar dramas happen and the exaggerations are equally over the top. It's an elision of codes, an elision of appearance, and that's great.

AF: I am glad you think so. But I have to tell you I fear I'm going to get killed when they see Superman and Supergirl here. But I just had to do it.

RS: Doesn't anybody have a sense of humor?

AF: Except for recent comic books, the only flying figures in Western art are the angels in Tintoretto, Tiepolo, and other Renaissance painters. It's wonderful to break space like that. There is something happening here to do with gravity.

ST. TERESA

AF: Here's my original drawing of St. Teresa [of Ávila, 1515–1582]. The Pennsylvania Academy [of the Fine Arts] commissioned a print, which I inscribed with her own words: "I saw in his hand a spear of gold and at the point a little fire. He thrust it into my heart and pierced my very entrails. When he drew it out he seemed to draw them out also and leave me on fire, with a great love of God."

I read about Teresa and guess what I learned? She was Jewish. Her parents were caught in the Spanish Inquisition; her grandfather was a rabbi, which means her grandmother was certainly Jewish



AUDREY FLACK (b. 1931), *Crazy Bad Girl* [Camille Claudel], 2017, digital pigment print with mixed media, 24 x 17 7/8 in.

and her parents also. In order to survive, many Jews were forced to convert. I doubt Teresa knew she was a Jew. My family went through the Inquisition and I have a love of everything Spanish; it's in my genes. I collect *santos*. One account of Teresa says, "She read inappropriate literature and tried to dress inappropriately." She probably rouged her cheek and lips. She was a girl of 14 or 15. What inappropriate literature could she be reading? God knows, but they sent her to a nunnery. So she was a sexed-up kid. [Laughter] And smart. Bernini got that.

RS: Bernini definitely got it.

KITSCH

AF: I'll bring something up that is kind of dangerous — Thomas Kinkaid, the artist. In Pennsylvania my husband, Bob, and I [took time off from visiting our daughter in a hospital and] went to a local strip mall, where a gallery was showing Kinkaid paintings. All of them had a house in the woods with smoke coming out of the chimney, the light on, and a charming brick road leading to the Dutch-style front door. And these paintings comforted me.

Not in the way that a late Rembrandt speaks

to me. But they gave me something to hold onto that isolated time, that momentarily removed me from my horrible situation. From then on, I thought about Kinkaid differently. In this vale of tears we live in, with the difficulties we have, a glowing house in the woods surrounded by flowers or snow, moonlight or sunshine, can be a great comfort.

RS: There's no shame in that.

AF: In this art world?

RS: You've been around longer than I have. The art world changes, all the time. What is completely unacceptable becomes acceptable, what is completely agreed upon falls apart, and actually that's not a bad thing. I don't like Kinkaid; you're never going to convince me, but that's OK.

AF: I'm not convincing you to like him; just understand the comfort...

RS: Similarly, all of us like sentimental songs. We like different ones, but if you look at the lyrics and think about the musical structure, there's nothing there except what it gives us. Not to

admit that it gets to you, to pretend that you're too good for it, to fly above it. That is inexcusable, right? It's one thing if you hold it up as great, complicated, sophisticated art. No, it is not. But kitsch wouldn't work if it didn't have something that people wanted. In his famous article, [Clement] Greenberg basically said that kitsch is great art that has fallen into disgrace by being too easy, too user-friendly, right? We're susceptible to it, no matter who we are.

AF: Is the face I drew of Bernini's angel kitsch?

RS: Your piece is not, because it is self-consciously playing with this good and bad taste, right? And Bernini is not bad taste. He is exquisite.

AF: He is exquisite, but if you look at the face of that angel, it's super sentimental. Can it be called bad taste now?

RS: Yes, but part of it is that the idea of angelic youth offends us now. Times have changed.

AF: Do you think that all of these images are camp?

RS: I think they are camp and kitsch, but also admiring of great Old Master work, for the right reasons. And I think they're demonstrations of your skill in some departments, and there are areas where you let it all hang out. You glitter it up. The old pejoratives: camp, kitsch; the other one is preciousity, the

idea that something is effeminate. Why should a woman not be effeminate, I wonder?

AF: Well, I was once criticized for it.

RS: When Mimi Schapiro and others took tropes out of women's craft and amped them up, that was a declaration of independence. When gay artists take things that are "too effeminate" and amp them up, they're asking why we have such a bad attitude towards those things. Why is glitter glitter in one context and something else in another? These questions are not actually about art, but about sociology and class relations to taste. If it's "folk," it's OK. If it's just our guys in a bad neighborhood, it's not OK. All of these things are open to constant re-evaluation.

When I'm teaching I ask, "Who is the artist you hate the most?" Because you'll learn more from your hatred of an artist than you will learn from the things you love. The things you can't stand are probably things about your own sensibility you don't like — effeminate or decorative or bad taste. The minute somebody has a clear idea of what they must not do, they need to look it straight in the eye and ask, "Why is it that I must not do it?"

AF: So who do you hate?

RS: Now, practically nobody. [Laughter] André Derain I can't stand — his later works. What I really don't like is earnest, pompous, conservative art. I like many things that artists called conservative, but were done with vigor. There are some works by Balthus that are wonderful. And others that just make my skin crawl ... so much attitude behind it; so sure of its own virtues but actually without any.

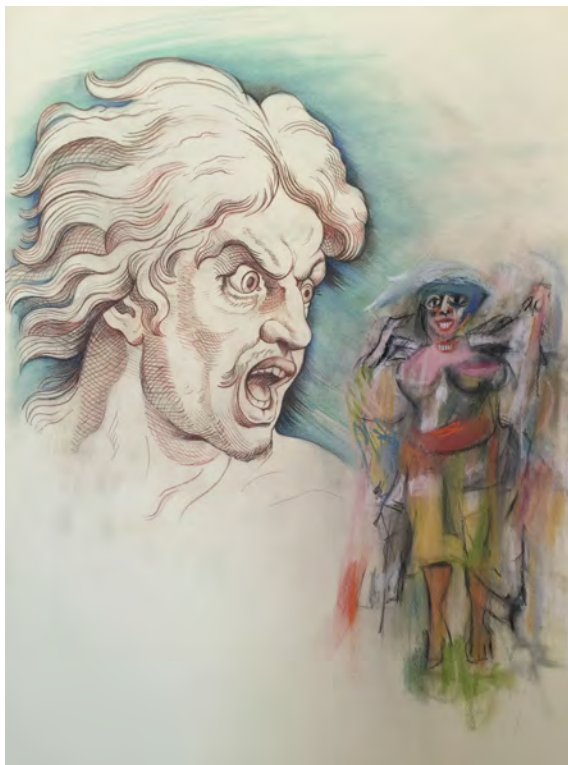
AF: I think there's a lineage that makes you attracted to certain artists more than others. I go right for Luisa Roldán, for Spanish High Baroque. The Met just acquired two Pedro de Mena sculptures to die for — life-sized busts of Christ and Mary. Incredibly lifelike. These artists are my lineage.

I am so tired of proclamations of "this is how art has to be" and "this guy is no good." I find myself loving Crivelli, Roldán, Jeger — artists who have been ignored by art history. I don't love them because I want to be perverse. I love them because I love their work. Because I don't buy into the garbage of art matching the fashion of its times.

RS: This is why we're here talking today, because there are so many people who not only don't care about art very much, but they truly do not love it. Why they get involved in the art world is beyond me. If art doesn't interest you, if it offends you, if you find it somehow a rebuke to your very tiny view of the world, then leave it alone.

WHAT TO CALL IT

AF: How would you refer to my new work? Is there a name for what I'm doing?



AUDREY FLACK (b. 1931), *Queen of Sheba* [At left: Charles LeBrun; at right: Willem de Kooning], 2016, mixed media on paper, 39 1/4 x 27 1/2 in.

RS: You're the first Flackist, the leader of the Flack.

THE ART WORLD NOW

RS: For the first time in a long time, I just don't know what's happening. I'm not sure anyone does. There's no center of gravity. That's not a bad thing. I think people say, "Let's get back to the days when there was a mainstream." I'm not sure that's what I want at all. I do think it's a loss that the field is so big and that everybody's paying so small an amount of attention to each part of it. Now we have to choose what we're going to focus on. Not to make the case for only one thing or the best thing. But to say, this is the thing about which I know most, which I am drawn to, to which I have the strongest connection.

AF: Then there is the return to realism.

RS: To representation. Realism, per se, is not doing so well these days. There are some good

realist painters. Your generation at Yale marked one of the great ages of realist painting in this country since the 19th century — real realism, Rackstraw Downes, Chuck Close, Philip Pearlstein, all those people. Now there are a lot of people who are not really realists, because they use conventions of representation derived from observation, but they're not using them in the manner of observation. They're not studying the thing. They're using the conventions for representing that thing to make a picture.

AF: There was a period after abstract expressionism when there were very few realists around: Pearlstein, Sidney Tillim, Harold Bruder, Paul Georges, Lennart Anderson, Gabriel Lederman, and some others. We hired a model and drew together in each other's studios. Robert Schoelkopf was studying art history at Yale when I was there. I approached him to show this group of realists, and in 1963 he organized *Nine Realist Painters*. Nobody has looked at that period because right after it came Pop and Photorealism. The younger realists coming up now are based on that period.

RS: That would make a great show. That is something that we should do. But my definition of realism may be more restrictive than yours. There is realism, or at least painting that borders on realism, being done, and some of it is quite interesting. Very little of it is aware of history.

Editor's Note: *We at Fine Art Connoisseur look forward to publishing an article about the Nine Realist Painters show mentioned above, and about its links with what's happening today. We thank Audrey Flack and Robert Storr for sharing their thoughts with us here, and we look forward to hearing more about that 1963 exhibition.*

Peter Trippi is editor-in-chief of Fine Art Connoisseur.