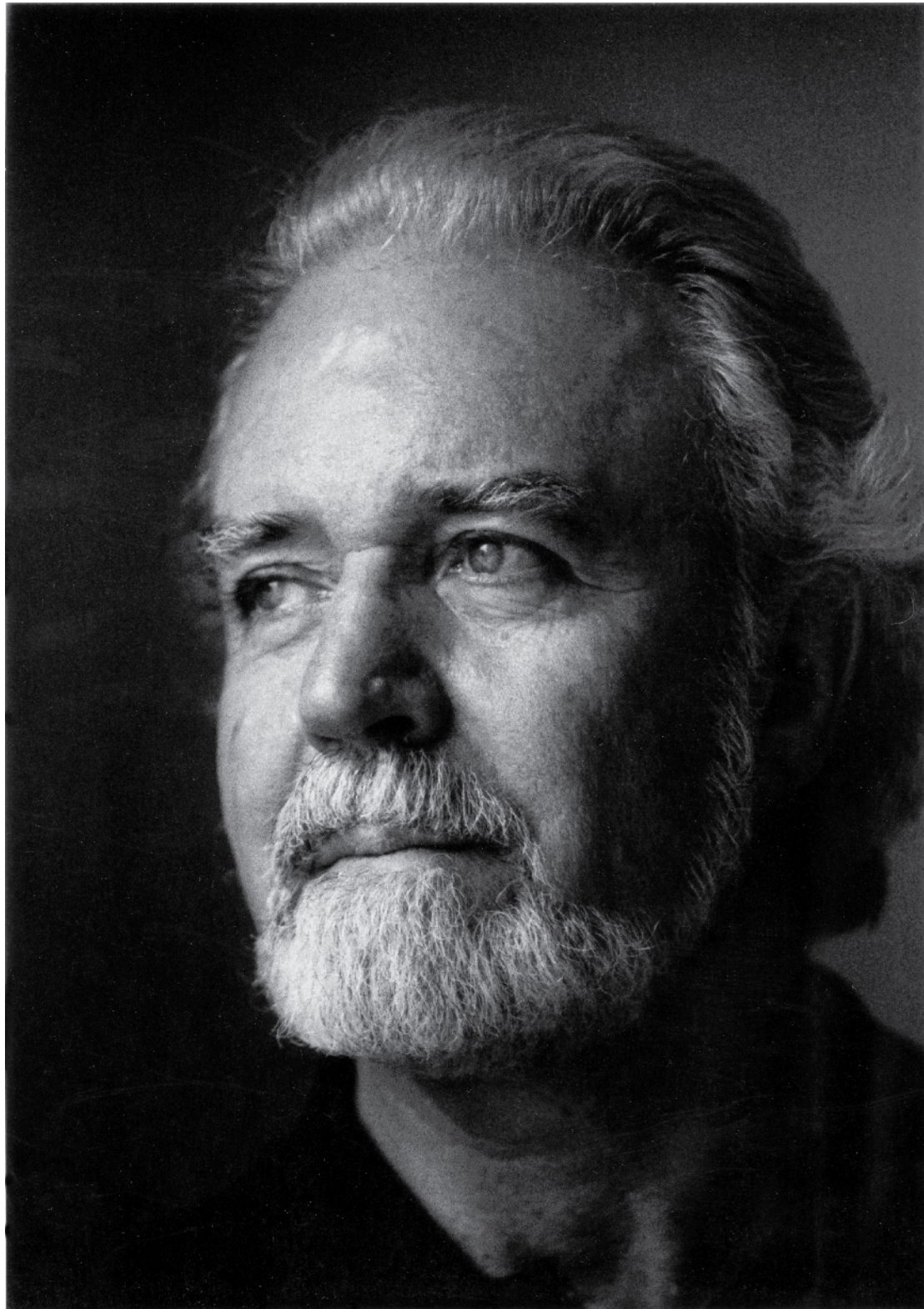




George A.
RADA
A Painter's Journey

With an essay by Joel Silverstein



GEORGE RADA: A Painter's Journey

It was my good fortune to know George Rada. A tall, good-looking man with piercing blue eyes and a silver beard, he had a serious yet playful nature projecting a lightness of spirit that subtly changed the people around him. I met George in his capacity as president of Artists Talk on Art, an organization dedicated to aesthetic discussion. The breadth of his knowledge was impressive and our interactions grew into a friendship based on shared interests and long studio jags over coffee. Our conversations were often thematic, linking the role of the figure in contemporary art, the language of the Old Masters, and the future of art in general. His ideas were a reflection of his life, embodying a diversity that younger artists cannot match. He served as a captain in the United States Army Artillery, shipped out as a commercial sailor to the Caribbean and South America, studied at the Art Student's League, and became an art director for a trade publication and then a commissioned portrait painter. He held a degree in classical studies and eventually worked as a consulting educator for the New York City Board of Education.

Greek and Roman mythology fired his imagination and infused his works. His interest in myth paralleled that of the Abstract Expressionists. However, whereas the Rothko and Pollock generation turned to indigenous narratives and abstract form as a radical distillation of Jungian archetypes, George doggedly pursued Western classical ideals within a representational framework as the best signifier of experience. In this regard, his formal journey echoed those of Philip Pearlstein, Jack Beal, Al Leslie, Paul Georges, and many others who returned to the figurative image after 1960.

George was devoted to realism as a branch of representational painting. He conceived of it not simply as a style, but as a complex aesthetic capable of communicating the most subtle emotional, ontological, and intellectual truths. He felt that this tradition represented a nexus of practical and ethical knowledge embodying a humanist perspective. It unifies mind, hand, and eye, defining a seminal role as inner guide to one's life: pedagogue, taskmaster, religious advisor, therapist, confidant, and coach. Although realism practices a dialogue with other art, it vests ultimate truth in ocularity—in what one sees—viewing it as superior to anything issuing from mere conceptual practice or studio improvisation. Albertian philosophy of the Renaissance era dictated that art is endemic, preexistent, and must be extricated from nature. The inspired core of George's life became how to make such thought relevant to our own era. He remained cognizant, diligent, patient, and thorough. Content to work each day, he adapted the persona of the skilled artisan, quietly pouring himself into an image. He was absorbed in reflection, and reflection became the subject of his art.



Random Thoughts, 1995, Oil on canvas, 42 x 32 inches

NARRATIVES

In the mid 1990s, Rada created a startling series titled “Random Thoughts.” Collaborating with female models, Rada depicted them as protagonists in painterly dramas of reverie and personal history. Each canvas pictures a woman holding a doll in her hands, striking a duality between the plaything left behind in childhood and the choices made as adults. *Random Thoughts I* shows a young woman perched on a chair near a child’s bench. Apparently in a dream-like state and oblivious to her surroundings, the subject avoids our gaze by looking aside. Her general affect and gestures are tense and upon closer inspection, her mouth and eyes are etched with fine lines of stress. As she clutches her doll, it is obvious that the emotional contact and reassuring rapport suggested by the childhood toy is never attained. The psychological motivation intensifies as the doll’s face is purposefully obscured from the viewer. In other works of this series, the qualities of the erotic are regarded in direct relationship to the innocence of childhood. In *Remembrance*, a woman is presented in a costume and accoutrements that evoke her African forbears: patterns in tan and black, a skirt cut seductively at the midriff and thigh, and a traditional hairstyle of cornrows dropping to her shoulder. Her expression is forthright, amused and approachable in the presence of her ethnic doll. This work may be compared and contrasted to *Distant Thoughts*, in which a seductive Asian woman leans back on a simple pile of storage boxes. Looking sideways through half-lidded eyes, the subject signals the muted possibility of dream and seduction in the presence of her doll. Her tight red dress and sultry come-hither look recall Anna May Wong, the classic Chinese-American screen siren of the 1930s. Despite the traditional Chinese association of red with good fortune, it is perhaps a touch of Hollywood glamour that the doll’s clothing color matches her own.

Each model assumes a pose dictated not only by formal logic, but by a dramatic persona as well. Rada plays the eroticism of his subjects, having them stand or recline in positions that are replete with multiple meanings. In *Meditation*, a woman sits on the floor, legs splayed dynamically; in *In Half Space*, a model seated in a chair folds her legs demurely. Rada undercuts simple voyeurism by holding on to the essential human truth of his psychological premise: Woman relates to doll, which immures the male gaze and turns vision to empathy and identification. He also consciously uses women of various races and ethnicities to communicate universality. All adults have left the reassurances of childhood behind, if they ever experienced them at all. What remains is the anxiety of adulthood and a pile of old toys presented as the nature of psychological individuation. The significance of the doll lingers in our consciousness as the paintings progress. They become metaphors for past choices no longer actively remembered but still affecting our lives as the remnants of unfulfilled dreams.



The Victorians Thomas Dewing and Lawrence Alma Tadema depicted women as exaggerated symbols, often externalizing simple states of mind. Yet these artists also enmeshed their figures in contemporaneous and complex ideas of beauty and sexuality. As Rada updated these conventions, his double meanings created a modern sense of ambiguity, intruding upon our own voyeurism and stressing subtle forms of self-confrontation. Painterly technique is paramount in this regard, because control constitutes an essential part of the series. Rada avoided reflected impressionist color: his painted forms are cast in silvery penumbral light



(Left) *Remembrance*, 1997, Oil on canvas, 42 x 32 inches

(Right) *Distant Thoughts*, 1998, Oil on canvas, 42 x 32 inches



(Left) *Meditation*, 1995, Oil on canvas, 42 x 32 inches



(Right) *In Half Space*, 1996, Oil on canvas, 42 x 32 inches

that envelops the described bodies in pools of umber or ultramarine shadow. The richness of grisaille is deepened by the yellow silk of *In Half Space* and the bold patterning of *Remembrance*. We are in a land of the fragmentary, where the past can never be reclaimed and the perception of threat is merely the projection of our own impulses. Offering riveting focal points and lush descriptions, “Random Thoughts” revels in the problems of the modern world even as it adheres to the constraints of the figurative tradition.

Before embarking on the “Random Thoughts” series, George had created a separate body of work entitled “Past/Present,” which focused on the doll as a still-life element. Dolls elicit strong psychological reactions both in art and life, from warm childhood remembrance to outright hallucination. They are stand-ins for the body, baby surrogates and poppets of witchcraft’s lore. Their legacy is that of somatic magic. Medieval alchemists conjured little people called “homunculi” in glass retorts. Austrian expressionist Oscar Kokoschka built a life-sized replica of ex-girlfriend Alma Mahler and dragged it about as if it were alive. Rada’s own methods derive from the traditions of Dutch still life, where inanimate objects such as flowers, skulls, or snuffed candles detail the vanity of human existence. The concept of *Vanitas* revolves around life’s ephemeral nature, the purgation of sin and the expiation of the soul. Later in the twentieth century, the magic realism movement echoed this view. One need only remember the rotting carcass-like portraits of Ivan Allbright to understand that we have not evolved as far as we think. In the “Past/Present” series, George brought a strong sense of metaphysical starkness coupled with surreal hysteria. We are no longer sure if we are projecting our own thoughts or merely reading the secret life of toys.

The paintings are set in a simple studio or basement environment and sequentially build in tension and complexity. *Past/Present I* depicts an old sneaker, paint can, teddy bear, and doll piled in a corner. *Past/Present II* presents a doll in a pink dress uneasily taking its first steps on broken legs. In *Past/Present III*, the doll beckons the viewer with a benign smile, like a demented fugitive from an Easy-Bake Oven commercial. A pale white figurine in *Past Present IV* emerges from a Woolworth shopping bag, itself a remnant of a bygone era, mimicking the pose of Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* (1484–6). By the time we reach *Past/Present V, VI, VII*, and *Ad Infinitum*, the works have become exacerbated, emotionally threadbare, and poised on the brink of madness. It is as if the protagonists have grown comatose, somnambulistic, their archaic smiles reflecting death. *Past/Present VII* shares much with Sir John Everett Millais’s rendition of the drowned *Ophelia* (1851–2). Like Shakespeare’s tragic heroine, are the dolls symbols of women’s social status as victim, or are they the consummate others reporting from the edge of uneasy graves? We do not know. The strange coloration of thin wintry grays and lurid purples plied against localized pinks and shocking whites alienates us from still life’s usual pleasures. One recalls the elegant and quiet works of Edwin Dickinson or Grant Wood, as George joins the ranks of the American Gothic.



Past/Present I, 1993, Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches



Past Present II, 1993, Oil on canvas 24 x 18 inches



Past Present III, 1994, Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches



(Left) *Past Present IV*, 1994, Oil on canvas, 24 X 18 inches



(Right) *Past Present VII*, 1995, Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches



East 88th Street Morning, 1990, Oil on canvas, 26 x 20 inches

LANDSCAPE

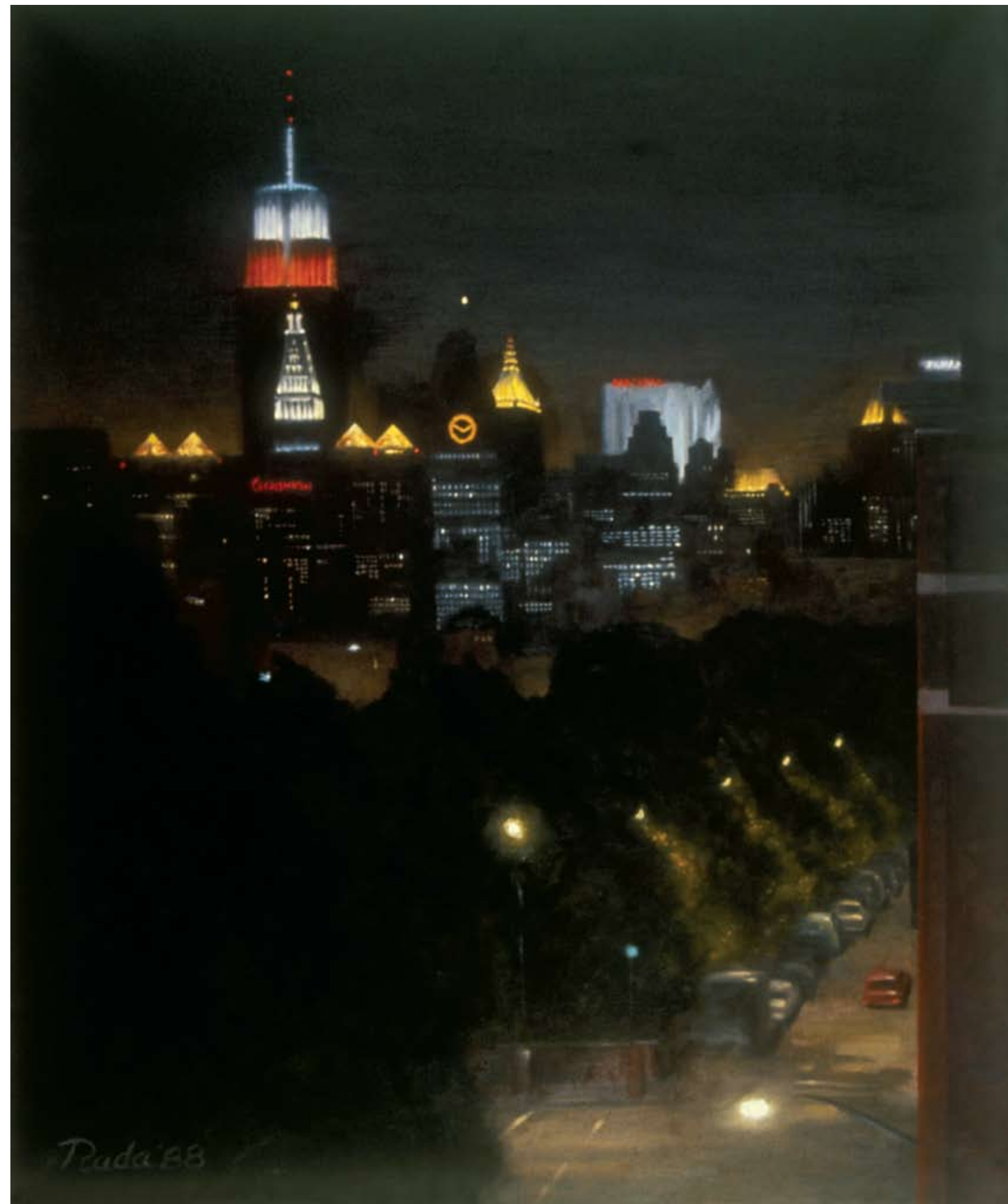
George was a gifted and prolific landscape painter: a devotee of Corot, Constable, Sloan, Bellows, and Renoir. He was exceptional at rendering the specificity of scene, which leads to the viewer's recognition of a physical location. *East 88th Street Morning* is a gorgeous case in point. The cool, clean modernist façade of the Guggenheim Museum is contrasted against its townhouse neighbor, as well as the sparse apartment buildings further down the block. The museum radiates a pure off-white, punctuated by the green trees on the adjoining rooftop gardens. A hundred years of New York architecture is depicted as a physical manifestation of time, even as a hobbled nature reasserts itself in the face of man's intervention. *East 88th Street Morning* is a smooth work of perfect scale but diminutive construct, like a child's vision of a metropolis built in Lego blocks. *Labor Day Night* (1988) is a view of the Empire State Building and its environs as seen from the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It is late summer and the colors are rich, ripe, and pulsating in evening's heat. A true city nocturne in the tradition of Whistler and O'Keefe, the painting includes long shafts of plum shadow with skyscrapers riding astride like dollops of lemon and cherry ice. This is a native New Yorker's vision, a leaning-your-head-out-of-the-car-window-on-the-F.D.R.-Drive kind of painting, casually etched in your memory forever. *Village Corner* (1997) has the same urban feeling. A Greenwich Village day is depicted and the trees are a riot of yellow-orange and mint strokes. Reminiscent of 1940s bohemia, the corner shop is illuminated in brilliant salmon pink; six bars of white mimic the effect of sunlight. An intrepid parked car or two are signified with seeming ease by a few taps of the brush and the materiality of the paint. Simple, warm, and evocative, it is a work akin to the style of Fairfield Porter: fluid, painterly, dogged, intractable, and utterly American—a practical kind of poetry.

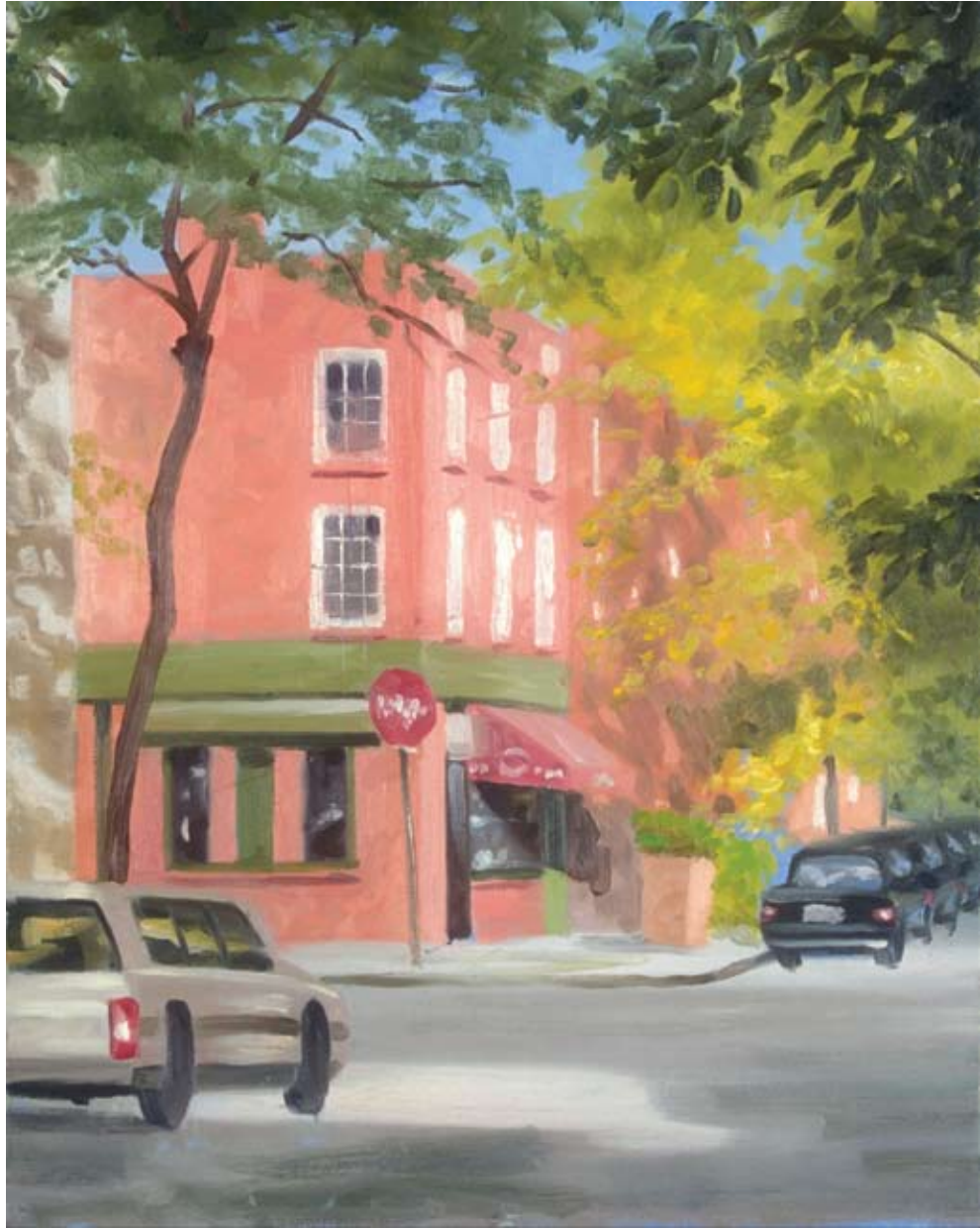
The Quiet Zone (1997) depicts the East Meadow in Central Park and its denizens. This work clearly derives from the worlds of Poussin and Claude Lorraine, representing the sum of George's inclinations as a Classicist in rhythmically fusing landscape and the human figure. Like *East 88th Street Morning* and *Labor Day Night*, *The Quiet Zone* deals with a New Yorker's particular sense of scale. The monumental looms above the horizon, while the particularly human lingers below, as massive trees arch over tiny spectators. The color and draftsmanship are clear, concise, and strictly delimited. As with other contemporary experts of this genre such as Milet Andrejevic and Lennart Anderson, eternity is found in a single moment. It is constituted by the

stillness found in a few simple elements. Central Park stands in for Arcadia, a garden of closed composition. We can assume in Rada's work a self-consciousness commensurate with the modern world, even as the figures superficially resemble the woodsmen or Bible characters of a Corot painting. His little blobs of paint are extraordinarily capable of waving greetings to us while we stifle the urge to do the same. It may seem like a kitsch and trivial response wholly unworthy of important art, but I think that was George's intent. A successfully executed mimetic paradigm produces an illusionism initially forgoing critical analysis, as the body and psyche are positioned in continuity with a projected horizon. A real (read phenomenological) experience is created by an essentially false object, a representational dichotomy going back to Zeuxis and the beginnings of western art. Its contradictory appeal was fundamental to George's aesthetic, as he contemplated the history of representation through a perceived subject.

George painted avidly both in New York City and the Hamptons, where he summered from the 1980s to the early 2000s. He worked in both oil and pastel. The paintings reflect the influence of this powdery material; they are chalky, off-the-cuff, and frank. Placid and bucolic horizons fill with tawny color, as in *Mecox Farms*, *Louse Point* and *Farm on Scuttelhole Road* (both 1992–4). The scale is small, almost precious. At this late date, Rada still insisted that a few key elements—the passing of light on the water, the tremble of clouds, a few reeds, a potato field, or a farmhouse—were still the proper subject of art. Whereas his contemporary Willem de Kooning drew abstract inspiration from the same environment, George's hero remained John Constable. He loved the story about how the English artist relished the squish of cow dung beneath his boots during a painting jaunt, adamantly reflecting the joys and mixed blessings of the realist painter's trade.

Labor Day Night, 1988, Oil on canvas 35 x 29 inches





Village Corner, 1997, Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches



The Quiet Zone, 1993, Oil on canvas, 28 x 25 inches



Mecox Farms, 1992, Oil on canvas, 16 x 26 inches

Louse Point, 1992, Oil on canvas, 18 x 28 inches



Farm on Scuttelhole Road, 1993, Oil on canvas, 22 x 28 inches

EXPERIMENTATION AND EVALUATION

At the age of 56, Rada was at the height of his creative powers as an artist. He had devoted his life to representational art and the aesthetics of realism. How strange that he should experiment with the formal language of his works at this point in his life! There are artists whose stylistic changes are protean, like Picasso, for whom a few months or years can bring about a critical revolution. There are also artists like Stanley Spencer, who change minimally if at all, successfully deepening their work throughout their lifetime. There is also the issue of critical theory, undermining the individual artist's hand, so that arbitrary visual language replaces style and appropriation refutes the assumptions of individuality. The marketplace has also made new demands upon the artist. It insists upon an art product based on the needs of the viewing audience and the evolution of consumer taste. The question is: Why did George, already comfortable and erudite in his use of realism, decide to change so late in the game? He was in New York during the critical reign of Clement Greenberg, witnessed the advent of Picasso, Pollock, and de Kooning. The artist saw the rise of pop art and a whole new generation of critics take charge. By 1990, his late stylistic evolution was initiated by a growing interest in postmodern painting. The work of Julie Heffernan, David Bierk, and David Deutsch, for example, provided an idea of tradition as something to be employed and commented upon. Promising a new purpose, one involving visual punning and word play, these paintings provided the visual equivalent of a verbal philosophy. In addition, George's interest in classical mythology made him sympathetic to such artists as Martha Mayer Erlebacher and Claudio Bravo, traditional artists initially but superficially grouped with postmodern art. The classical language redux came into view because, if all painterly styles were equally rife for appropriation, so were the philosophies that accompanied them. Largely, the *Revenge of the Philistines* generation did not care a fig about Greek and Roman myths, but they did like the Classical visual style associated with them. After forty years of abstraction, figurative art connoting mythology was certainly novel.

The hubris of the New York School and its legacy conflicted with George's emotional nature. He continued to insist that realism was a mimetic craft requiring a degree of humility and humanist purpose. Furthermore, the physical look of a Pollock or de Kooning abstraction held little interest for him. He wanted to engage a larger viewing audience of broader perceptions than those of the New York elite. Yet he could not abandon the abstract concept of sublimity. In effect, he recognized and admired what he could not care for. He longed for the spirituality of art as articulated by the masterpieces of the past. Art had been tied to religion, but during the Romantic period, the sublime had been secularized. The sublime as articulated by Kant is the shock and awe we experience by infinity and the limited language we possess to describe



Figure in Yellow, 2002, Oil on canvas, 26 x 18 inches

it. Over a hundred years later, the early modernists derived their concepts from theosophy, an admixture of Christian and Asian philosophies, as an abstracting principal. By the mid-twentieth century, Clement Greenberg reinvented Kant (or covertly re-expressed the second commandment in his goal of a new sublime). By this time, George decided to reexamine the Neo-Platonism of the Renaissance, of Plotinus, Pico della Mirandola, and Ficino. Placing fully modeled figures against flatly colored backgrounds, Rada echoes his heroes, Giotto and Piero della Francesca. Using the techniques of his “Random Thoughts” series, the artist employed multiple racial types as the symbolic human family. In his “Figure” series, each model is juxtaposed against an abstract ground, personifying the temporal against the eternal. For Giotto, the importance of Gothic art was too strong to ignore even in the face of his own innovation. The Arena Chapel frescoes (circa 1306) placed characters of narrative import against near-abstract grounds of the purest blue. The grounds alternately read as sky or infinity, depending upon one’s orientation. As George paraphrased the Florentine artist, the contrast and ambiguity inherent in the original work served as both a criticism and alternative to modern realism. Rada’s contemporary paintings here well up in an accumulation of detail. In one, a woman strikes a pose of the *Dying Niobe* of Greek art (450–440 B.C.); another is reminiscent of Ruben’s *Death of Seneca* (1615). This series led Rada to ever-more-daring formal experiments, breaking the modernist dictum of stylistic unity. As in his “Past /Present” series, still life elements symbolize human beings, for example in *He and She* (both in 1998). Their backgrounds are rigorously divided into color quadrants. George reproduced the crystal sheen on glazed ceramics with realist orientation, but he floated the objects in order to undermine their figurative logic. Dissociated fragments of earlier paintings make their way into George’s *Homage to the Postmodern* and *Media Arts* (both 1999), as dolls, posed models and even fashion photographs morph into flag-like formal hierarchies. These are Rada’s most open-ended and experimental works demonstrating his evolving interests. He seized upon a striking resolution in the “Diffusion” series (2001–2), where wholly abstract rectangles conjoin with Mondrian-like grids.

However, American high modernism is disrupted by George’s insistence upon a narrative motivation for his shapes. It is as if the rectangles move of their own accord, creating smoke trails from their bottom edges. This atmospheric transformation may be traced to a figurative device used in Northern Italian Renaissance painting. In *Jupiter and Io* (1530) by Correggio, for example, and *The Last Supper* (1592–4) by Tintoretto, a figure transforms into a spiritual being as to be interpreted specifically within the structures of both Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman metaphysical thought systems. Sfumato is employed as a byproduct of



He, 2000, Oil on canvas
20 x 18 inches



She, 2000, Oil on canvas
20 x 18 inches



Homage to the Postmodern, 1999, Oil on canvas, 26 x 18 inches



Media Arts, 1999, Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches



Diffusion Series I, 2001–2002, Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

miracle, the atmospheric color a visual signifier as well as concrete evidence (abracadabra, presto-chango!). In a more contemporary work, we can look at the puff of smoke from a departing train engine in Giorgio de Chirico's *Autumnal Melancholy* (1915). The plume from the departing train disrupts the linear structure of the space, announcing the loss of traditional metaphysics and the advent of an existential and modernist dilemma. George professed that traditional metaphysics were a proper content for art. In his work, the rectangle symbolizes the integrity of the body and its ability to transcend its material concerns; Rada reconciled the formal qualities of shape with its mystical counterparts. Like Philip Guston, who also questioned the limits of modernism, George went beyond the mere formalist configuration of painting to renegotiate its meaning.

Diffusion Series III, 2001–2002, Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches



FINAL WORK

An artist's last works always fascinate us. *Crows Over a Wheatfield* (1890) was prized for many years as van Gogh's last work, until recent scholarship proved otherwise. When myth trumps reality, publish the myth. The painting is still the definitive van Gogh in people's minds, symbolically encapsulating the artist's tragic life and prophet-like premonitions of his own death. It is also true that an artist's inopportune or untimely demise tends to strengthen our sense of poignancy concerning his or her art. Given the nature of modernism, added burdens are placed upon artists. Did they reach some form of ultimate expression and summation in their painting? Note the problems of formal scholarship concerning the last works of Jackson Pollock, which do not conform to the splatter-and-drip canon. Mistake? Loss of vision? Transitional third style? Reevaluation of abstract expressionism? Problems are inherent in this line of stylistic systematization. George's investigations were cut short and not given time to grow. Only four works remain from his late mythology series, which fused geometric shape, classically inspired figure, and narrative with allegorical associations. How could he succeed in fusing picture and painting, figuration and abstraction, symbol and allegory in a format that threatened to tear itself apart? In a way, his last work, *Io* (2002), is George at his most enigmatic and haunting.

Io depicts an attractive woman of about thirty or thirty-five. Her dress is neat but casual: silver pants, orange shirt, and high heels. She is blond and wears lipstick and mascara. Reflecting the conventional fastidiousness of a Madison Avenue entrepreneur or a director of human resources, she is declarative and contemporary as if poised on the edge of an office chair. Nevertheless, there is a break in the figure/ground relationship that destroys normative realism. The space is completely bifurcated like a geometric abstraction. A yellow bar is on the left, sky blue on the right. The woman is perched on a cloud floating between her feet and her buttocks, while another accumulation of this material gathers under her arm. The painting is, among other things, a portrait, and the sitter looks away from us. The painting also includes two outstanding references to classic artworks: On the left side there is a careful rendering of a Ruben's study *Hercules Slaying Envy* (alternately called *Hercules as Heroic Virtue Overcoming Discord*, 1632–3). The right side of the work refers to the previously mentioned *Jupiter and Io* by Correggio. George's interest in myth, allegory, and dramatic realism naturally led him to the Baroque era. We are obviously a long way from a simple mimetic paradigm, and this bears some explaining.

As early as 1925, Walter Benjamin referred to the German Baroque in his *Trauerspiel Study* (*Origin of the German Tragic Drama*) as allegorical rather than symbolic. It is filled with "the

Io, 2002, Oil on canvas, 46 x 36 inches



conscious degradation of the object,”¹ at once playful and fragmentary, a rebus or epigram rather than a false whole. The fragmentary nature of this allegory ties us to the tragedy of history and the redemption of a blood-soaked culture. Benjamin believed that the study of the Baroque was by no means an antiquarian or archival hobby. It mirrored our own dark present. By the 1970s, art historians following the semiotic revolution in philosophy began writing about Baroque painting (renamed “seventeenth-century painting”) as quotation, pastiche, and bricolage, an image put together from other images rather than mere mimesis. George’s lifelong devotion to myth and content pushed his realism to what we would call a postmodern conclusion, yet if asked, George could happily point to the examples of allegory already present in the Baroque art of Rubens or Correggio. He would refer to such works as visual codes, which needed to be enriched and strengthened by viewer education.

Rubens’s *Hercules Slaying Envy* exists both as a sketch in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and as a finished work on the banqueting hall ceiling in Whitehall Palace, London. It depicts a very muscular Hercules wrestling a woman with a snake; the woman personifies envy or discord. For the seventeenth-century viewer, these code words had associations with war, specifically the religious wars that rocked Europe at the time. The iconography was understood to be symbolic of the Catholic Church conquering her Protestant enemies, using the male figure as a symbol of authority. The heroic, muscular ideal as envisioned by Justus Lipsius, a Neo-Stoic Flemish philosopher and close friend of Rubens, is the evolution of the pagan hero as Christian knight. Gone is the Heracles of old, the drunken fornicator, the psychotic who killed his wife and children in a god-induced rage. Here, Lipsius and Rubens relate the ideal of masculinity to righting wrongs through violent action as an analogy of man presiding over his own home. This allegory is equally applicable to the hegemony of the church, princes ruling over predemocratic principalities, or the average Joe fretting over his own marriage and finances. The woman with the snake personifies envy, one of the seven deadly sins and the enemy of peace and harmony. We have many similar images in contemporary culture, most notably superheroes in comic books and special-effect laden films (for example, Batman versus Poison Ivy and Wolverine versus Phoenix²). In these cases, female villains representing a malevolent variant of generative power threaten the social order, only to be thwarted by our hero, an outsider of superior abilities upholding social norms.

Correggio’s *Jupiter and Io* (circa 1531) at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, is part of a sequence of works based on *The Loves of Jupiter*. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is the source for this material, a work of late antiquity that reshaped far earlier myth and a popular source of visual imagery during the Renaissance and Baroque eras. In it, Jupiter wraps the earth in

darkness and transforms himself into a cloud. He descends upon Io, a beautiful but hapless Greek maiden, and tries to seduce her. Jupiter’s wife, the ever-vigilant Juno, has suspicions and now enters the scene. Jupiter camouflages his wrongdoing by transforming Io into a white heifer. According to Ovid’s poem, Io clearly protests her maidenly virtue and runs, the victim of an impending divine rape. In Correggio’s painting, liberties were taken in both content and form, as the artist projects a frank admission of eroticism in pagan guise pointing the way to Rubens. This Io clearly welcomes Jupiter’s embrace, generating an orgasmic bliss both haunting and incongruous. Great care is taken to reproduce the mist of a storm cloud morphing into Jupiter’s face as he kisses Io. It is an embrace of almost painful sensuality, as fog and flesh meet. One may see as does Marina Warner³, that Jupiter’s essence is consubstantial with cloud, a term relating to the Catholic doctrine of the tripartite godhead which is coexisting but indivisible. This was also an understandable comparison for contemporaneous audiences, who, despite (or maybe because of) the frank sensuality, saw Correggio’s Io as an allegory for divine insemination and confluence of God with mortal woman. The Annunciation of Mary stands as a ready comparison, evident in other works of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The audiences of Correggio, Caravaggio, and Rubens demonstrated that they could accept sexuality as commensurate with the divine, even as oil painting posed a specific investiture in erotic flesh. It is an issue still raising conflict, rage, and guilt among contemporary audiences.

George was well grounded in the formal, historical, and allegorical readings of the works he accessed. Classical and Judeo-Christian interpretations were his personal favorites, but he also hinted at modern ones as well. It is interesting that the allegories presented in his painting *Io* (2002) are thematically connected. Aescalus relates in his play, *Prometheus Bound* that Io is the thirteenth generation ancestor to Hercules, liberator of Prometheus. The Titan Prometheus is bound to a rock by Zeus for all of eternity, because he stole fire (read: culture) and gave it beneficently to humanity. Therefore, Io is to Hercules as Ruth is to King David in a Judeo-Christian parallel: an important female forebear whose travail is rewarded by a seminal role in the narrative and closeness to the godhead.

George’s painting is a contemporary altarpiece with heaven and earth, but in probably keeping with modern skepticism, no hell. The Rubens reproduction present is bold, dynamic, and muscular. This small image writhes in perpetual motion within the larger composition, suspended as if hanging on a wall. Hercules/sky/figure = reproduction/pastiche/academic observation, three separate modes of representation juxtaposed against each other. The subject thrusts her left leg and arm aggressively, bespeaking the earth, action, and modern

personality; the right is bent back over the cloud, poised and suppliant as if in prayer. In counterpoint, a watch, symbolic of temporal existence, is placed within the heaven quadrant, while the lack of ground plane in the earth quadrant points to the atemporal, notably leaving the figure unsupported. The Renaissance ideals of action and repose recast the powerful allegory. In contrast to the earlier Correggio work, this new Io is indifferent and even defiant to her would-be ravisher. She remains a particular woman, the object of absolute adoration cross-referenced with the conflicts of contemporary life: wanting to be loved but incapable of returning intimacy, mastering her surroundings but having them act upon her with a vengeance, standing on her own two feet but not being able to stand at all.

Jupiter penetrates Io in an act of creative possession. It is analogous to the standard European paradigm of male gaze visually penetrating the female subject, a phalocentric model of artistic creation challenged by Linda Nochlin, Rosalind Krauss, and others. Yet if the humanist tradition in the arts has been chastened for its blinkered proscriptions of universality, it certainly does not mean that humanist allegory is irrelevant or finished. George was convinced that new readings of old material would be the salvation of us all, and who is to say he was not correct? These allegories also read as a model of societal sublimation structured as a language. The renunciation of unbridled sexual impulse results in the uneasiness of modern conscience, caught as it were in the middle between id and super-ego constraints. According to Freud, the communal guilt over murderous or sexual impulses is the Ur experience of civilization, a positive proactive force, shaping higher, complex, and more evolved societal structures.

In *Io*, there is a complex analogy as George compares the visual aspect of the work of art to the moral aspect of culture, a dialogue resonating between the eye and the ear. This comparison structures the visual epigram pointedly, within the conventions of twentieth-century abstraction and in a way that differs from his earlier transitional experiments. Almost comically, and in this case with perfect timing, George's indifference to abstraction was apparent. He ultimately saw its credos—two-dimensionality, overallness in surface, art for art's-sake, and the rest—as an insufficient means of pictorial cohesion. Yet *Io* resolves his feelings on the dialectical relationship of abstraction to figuration in a dynamic and multifaceted way, as well as poses ironic commentary on what might be the dominant mode of pictorial representation of the twentieth century. By addressing different aspects of his concerns, he created a truly moving work, one that stays in the mind as long as one reflects on either painting or culture.

We are bound to see George's last work as a contemporary religious painting, in so far that it truly and honestly believes the sum of its own convictions. Transforming a modern

Io into a celestial deity puts George in the same realm as his Baroque compatriots, but is this a proper concern for an artist in the twenty-first century? Is not the whole point of modern art to be secular, so that the structure of art retains its own meaning and integrity? Are we to believe that contemporary art reflects an essential disbelief in the subject? On the other hand, perhaps art's rupture as a cohesive social body renders it unable to pose serious representations. Contemporary philosophers such as Derrida, Levinas, and Ricœur have considered God as a postmodern issue, leading a completely new generation to consider religion and metaphysics as proper thought for analysis and creative culture. This last look at George finds him at his creative peak, but also questing after something intangible, the bigger issues about life. Returning from the Vollard exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum (*Cezanne to Picasso: Ambroise Vollard, Patron of the Avant-Garde, 2006-7*), I was struck by the late great Gauguin painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897). During an epic era, art took on the big questions. Life. Death. Narrative. Perhaps George had a premonition at the time of *Io*, perhaps not, but one thing is clear. His belief in art as a vehicle for quest and introspection never wavered. *Io* is a fragment for what might have been, but we are glad it is here all the same.

George was a tireless advocate for art education. He worried that art tied to its own traditional craft would be lost, but also that we as a society would emerge without a sense of our own history. His fight gave rise to action on many fronts: painting, lecturing, teaching, planning discussions and organizing artist's and critic's panels. His goal was to impart a sense of urgency and community in the arts. He held that culture is the right of every human being and what is designated as "high culture" is eventually accessible to all through broad exposure and experience. His own organization, Multi-Cultural Visions Through the Arts, sought to show how styles and ideas diffuse, disseminate, and dialogue with each other. An ardent advocate of museum collections, he often employed art works from all over the globe as primary visual documents for administrators, teachers and students.

Knowing George for several years, I realize that there were actually several George Radas, all thematically linked but each unique and distinct. There was George the humanist and scholar, the everyday worker, the realist hero, the quester, the metaphysician, and the religionist. There was the George who railed against contemporary culture and who tried to do something about the deficiencies he perceived in it. Three quarters of his oeuvre reflects a luminous realism. We can identify it; we can classify it easily, as it exists within solid aesthetic canons. We delight in its ability to represent figurative content, to deliver the craft of painting. For this, George deserves our admiration and thanks in being so present and forthright. Nevertheless,

there was another George, the man on a mission with no end, the postmodern George who did not cohere. This George spiritually hungered in an art world predicated on irony. In some ways, this persona is the most fascinating, because the question of art in the new century has no easy solutions. Spirituality is a good place to start, as art about art, or art about nothing, or art about poking holes in its own edges, is a fashionable dead end. In this regard, it is not important how successful George was. He exists as an example to us all. He believed the tradition of art was a dialogue worthy of investing one's life. More importantly, he showed us that art is capable of evolving in order to fulfill its own potential and the emotional needs of a new audience. I recognize in George's intent a painting of the future as well as the past. Years ago as a boy in New Jersey, Rada envisioned himself as an artist, and he set about to become that man. He succeeded in his own life's measure. We will all miss him deeply.

NOTES

1. Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 130.
2. Batman and Poison Ivy are trademarked characters published by D.C. Comics, National Periodicals, a division of Warner Bros., an AOL Time Warner company. Wolverine and Phoenix are trademarked characters published by Marvel Publishing Inc., a subsidiary of Marvel Entertainment.
3. Warner, Marina. "Spirit Visions." Lecture delivered at *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Yale University, New Haven, CT, October 1999. Transcript at: www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/warner_01.pdf.

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PERIODICALS AND LECTURES

Kantor, Jordan. "Signature Styles: On Jackson Pollock's Late Work." *Artforum*, October 2006, 125–126.

Warner, Marina. "Lecture Two. After Ovid: Flowers & Monsters." Revised July 5, 2004. Transcript at: www.alumni.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/fms/default/uoa/for/alumni/docs/marina%20%warner%20.

GEORGE A. RADA SPEAKS OUT

Palmer Poroner

Born in the state of New Jersey and residing for years in New York City, George A. Rada studied art at the Art Students League and the Pratt Institute in that city. He has exhibited in the New York area since 1979 and completed a number of portrait commissions, including that of James Beard, noted American chef, as well as a mural commission. Rada has gathered together a body of mature work, reflecting his personal aesthetic.

Palmer Poroner: George Rada, in the development of art, great emphasis has been put on form for the past fifty years, on the features of space, color, light, composition, texture, line, as well as the process of making them. Subject matter and ideas about the subject itself were not stressed. How do you stand in regard to this tradition?

George A. Rada: My position is one of appreciation. My work encompasses what is achieved in this tradition, applied in the figurative manner.

PP: Have you found all this beneficial, useful to your art?

GAR: A certain amount is useful, but the large scale freedoms that those artists appear to allow are objectionable to me. I see art as developing within the framework of a discipline that controls what is to be employed in a painting.

PP: I can see that your choice is in the direction of realism and of being representational. Can you say why you made this choice?

GAR: First, intuitively! This is the manner I feel most comfortable in doing. It seems to give me the widest parameters of expression. During the course of my painting career, I've tried the abstract method and it didn't say enough for me. In figurative work, I am confident that I speak a common language with my viewer. I find it easier to communicate, to promote our dialogue.

I wish to set up images as guideposts so that I can lead the viewer to understand what I wish to say, to my own feelings and what my reactions are to the subject. My goal is to touch the intellectual, as well as the emotional chords of the viewer.

PP: Where in your work do you develop an interest in process?

GAR: I really get into the process of painting after I've laid out the painting, set up the composition (fairly deliberately), as well as my initial color palette,

and selected my imagery. After that, as I develop those images and space, each of these elements takes on its own formal demands. The preconceptions give way to how the objects work in relation to each other and their role regarding the space in which they are located. When I'm in the process, sometimes colorations don't work and need to be changed. Towards the end of the painting, the demands are made on my eye rather than on the subject matter.

PP: Going back to the origin of a painting, what motivates your choice of subject?

GAR: I begin with a general topic that is on my mind and I search for how I can depict it visually, what objects, what scene would serve my purpose. For example, I wanted show that even in the artificial environment of the city, the human beings have the need for contact with nature. I chose landscapes and cityscapes where nature is a needed presence. In paintings of Central Park in New York, buildings pop up over the tree tops or in street scenes, one can see the greenery in high rise gardens that city dwellers feel the need to create.

PP: We have the good fortune here in your studio to view works you produced over the last several years, the landscapes, the still lifes with dolls, the large portrait. The paintings are very well achieved, even masterful. You might refer to these to illustrate the points we are discussing. One matter that is noticeable on first impression is that your choice of subject, and no doubt, your manner have become more intimate. This is naturally so, since you move from more distant landscape to those close by and from landscape itself to still life. Why are you doing this? What other means are you employing for this new purpose?

GAR: I am physically getting closer to the subject involved. What led me onto the doll subject, the "Past Present" series, was the long standing question of choice. Specifically, our lives swing in the long run on the choices we make. Some of our past choices, after time, seem to matter little. However, they still have an effect on what happens to us today. What object or icon from childhood could I discover that is most meaningful in the choices one makes? I thought a toy, and in this series, a doll would be the best, the best metaphor for past choices.

I sought to develop this idea in various settings and relationships. I place the dolls to indicate that they are practically discarded, tossed into a corner, along with other discards and used up objects, such as old paint cans or a used sneaker.

PP: What proves that they are still influential?

GAR: The fact that they are still around. Some of these old dolls come from

someone in my family who is now an adult. These dolls are almost forgotten, yet remain in the memory. What indicates their influence into the present is how I highlight the liveliness of the eyes and even the hands. I find that I am constantly articulating the hands of the dolls, as though they are reaching out to the viewer, as in "Past/Present V". Their locations are both immediate and neglected, amid dirty old floors and pitted plaster walls. My inclination is to give the dolls active poses, indicating that the choices are still acting upon us.

Though the original choices may have been made glibly, they have an impact over time.

PP: Your latest painting, "Random Thoughts", by far larger, is a full length portrait of a young woman. It is more quiet and definitely more relaxed than the dolls. It is an arresting work, even compelling. My only explanation is that your concentration has been even greater than before, though each of your images are unforgettable. Does this begin a new series?

GAR: Well, actually, it developed directly out of the dolls, and it even has a doll in it. But this is zeroing in even tighter on what I want to say. When I felt I had gone as far as I could using the doll as metaphor, I brought in the human person to have a more intimate and direct dialog with the viewer. And yes, it is the beginning of a new series.

PP: It is even possible for the viewer to identify with her. In the process of doing the painting, you made many choices.

GAR: Certainly, choices within choices. For example, behind the figure, I place a chest, which is my mother's hope chest. She acquired it when she became engaged to be married, and it represents the path she chose for the rest of her life, full of hopes and memories. In the end it represents myself.

PP: How do you arrive at the emotion in "Random Thoughts", your most recent work?

GAR: Starting with the painting itself, I create the atmosphere by the variation in the shadows, the colors, the expression on the face, and the posture of the figure itself. She is leaning forward in a somewhat tense pose. She is thoughtful without being perplexed. She is reflecting, reminiscing over old memories of her inner life, as suggested by the doll she holds in her hands. The purple of the dress does hint at spirituality in her contemplation. The dress falling into deep shadows causes it to meld with the background, giving it a somewhat comfortable atmosphere. Atmosphere has always been very much a concern to me in every aspect of the painting. I paint landscapes on site, always in the same light conditions, to have integrity of atmosphere.

The emotions I want to evoke are not intense and direct. I want the viewer to find himself in a friendly atmosphere, where he can relax and enjoy the experience of sharing little sensations with the artist.

PP: This attitude certainly runs counter to the confrontational mood of a few years ago. The feeling you achieve is a subtle one, and complex. That is why the colors, textures and even compositions have different, sometimes even cross purposes. This is an indication of the humanity that you are seeking.

You seem to create planes in “Random Thoughts”, just as you did with areas in your painting of Central Park, and continuing ever since.

GAR: I very deliberately made progressive planes, to bring the figure very emphatically forward, into the presence of the viewer. The figure and the area where it sits is the picture plane of the composition. That is reinforced by the second plane going back, the area of the hope chest. That hope chest is in warm colors, yellow reds and burnt umbers, which contrast with the blue purple in the dress of the figure, and thus add to the forward thrust of the figure.

The third plane back, the wall, though gray, is made up of gray with viridian green. It contrasts with the colors of the hope chest, which pushes the chest forward, in turn projecting the figure into the space of the viewer.

PP: I can see you also vary your texture.

GAR: Texture is also an important factor. The figure has smooth varied colors, as does the surface of the hope chest. The floor itself, old and worn, is rough and uneven, and the knots show up. Its roughness contrasts with the smooth texture of the figure and gives the figure a solid platform on which to hold it in space.

PP: You make many choices when you create a painting, and they show your skill and great experience.

Next Magazine, Summer 1995
Palmer Poroner is an art critic for Artspeak,
an international review and Artlasision

BIOGRAPHY

EDUCATION

St. Peter’s College, NJ, B.A., Classics
Art Students League of New York, NYC
Frank J. Reilly School of Art, NYC
Pratt Institute of Contemporary Printmaking, NYC
New York Academy of Art, NYC

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Art Students League of New York, Life Member
Figurative Alliance, Founding Member
Artists Choice Museum
New York Portrait Painters Society, President
Artists Talk on Art, President, 2000–2003
Lenox Hill Artists Forum, Moderator
Artists In Partnership, AIP, Long Beach, NY
Long Beach Artists League, Long Beach, NY

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2004 Long Beach Historical Society Museum, NY, Memorial Exhibition
2003 Fairleigh Dickinson University, NJ
Long Beach Historical Society, Long Beach, NY
2002 Passaic County Community College, Paterson, NJ
1996 Clayton Liberatore Gallery, Bridgehampton, NY
1994 Clayton Liberatore Gallery, Bridgehampton, NY
1993 Greenhouse Gallery, The James Beard Foundation, NYC
Galerie des Hamptons, West Hampton Beach, NY
Republic National Bank, NYC
Clayton Liberatore Gallery, Bridgehampton, NY
1992 Clayton Liberatore Gallery, Bridgehampton, NY

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2007 St. Francis College, Brooklyn, NY
2006 Venezuelan Consulate, NYC
2005 Cork Gallery, Lincoln Center, NYC
Brooklyn Borough President’s Office Gallery, NYC
Passaic County Community College, Contemporary Art Collection
at The Hamilton Club
2004 Williamsburg Art & Historical Center, Brooklyn, NY
2003 Broome St. Gallery, NYC, Summer Salon I
Broome St Gallery, NYC, Newyorkartworld
2002 Broome St. Gallery, NYC, Newyorkartworld
Cork Gallery, NYC, Newyorkartworld
2001 Broome St. Gallery, NYC, Summer Salon III
2000 First Street Gallery, NYC, National Competition, Juried by William Beckman
Broome St Gallery, NYC, Summer Salon II

1999 Earl Gallery, 14th Street Painters Exhibition XIII, NYC
1998 DFN Gallery, NYC
Organization of Independent Artists Salon, NYC
Ernest Rubenstein Gallery at The Educational Alliance, NYC
Earl Gallery, 14th Street Painters Exhibition XII, NYC
1997 Jack Light Gallery, NYC, (February & April)
Earl Gallery, 14th Street Painters Exhibition XI, NYC
14th Street Painters, NYC Exhibition IX & X, NYC
1995 Cornell Medical Library, NYC
14th Street Painters, NYC Exhibition VIII
1994 Conservancy Garden, Central Park, NY
Michael Ingbar Gallery, NYC
Gallery One, NYC
1994 PDG Gallery, NYC
14th Street Painters, Exhibition VII, NYC
Roger Smith Gallery, NYC
Roger Smith Hotel Exhibition, NYC
Republic National Bank, NYC
1990 Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC (Group)
Clayton-Liberatore Gallery, Bridgehampton, NY
1989 Craft Students League of YWCA, NYC (Faculty Exhibition)
1988 Lenox Hill Artists Forum, NYC, 5 Group Shows Annually (1988–1995)
1987 Metropolitan Portrait Society, NYC, Selected Member Group
1985 Artists' Choice Museum, NYC
1979 Olympic Towers, NYC

Jo Hollingby, NYC & Southampton, NY
James Beard (posthumous), The James Beard Foundation, NYC
Hon. Chas Whitman & Mrs. Whitman, NYC & Watch Hill, RI
Chapman Barnes, Esq., Watch Hill, RI
Dr. Alice Mary Hilton, Ph.D., NYC
Mary Liberatore, Bridgehampton, NY
Eric Arneberg, NYC
Barbara Hauge, NYC
Freeman Bunn, Short Hills, NJ
Rev. Thomas Donlon, O.P., NYC & Chicago, IL
John Emery, Darien, CT
Nicole Gerrard, London, England
David McConnell, NYC & East Hampton, NY
Hurley Haywood, NYC & St. Petersburg, FL
Leslie Dunn, Darien, CT

Passaic Community College, Paterson, NJ, Permanent Collection
Linda Shields, NYC
Liz Coffin Allerhand, Long Beach, NY
Lucille & James Brady, Long Beach, NY

Allison & David Silverberg, Long Beach, NY
Eileen McGuire & John McLane, NYC
Christina Louis, NYC
Mudge Facey, Los Angeles, California
Alan Weintraub, Esq., Westfield, N J
Joan Fitzpatrick, NYC
Mr. & Mrs. Wain Rooks, NYC & Southampton, NY
William Allen, NYC
Barbara Summins, Chicago, IL
Susan Borman, NYC
Barbara Portmann, NYC & West Hampton Beach, NY

Jerard Jergens, NYC & Montego Bay, Jamaica

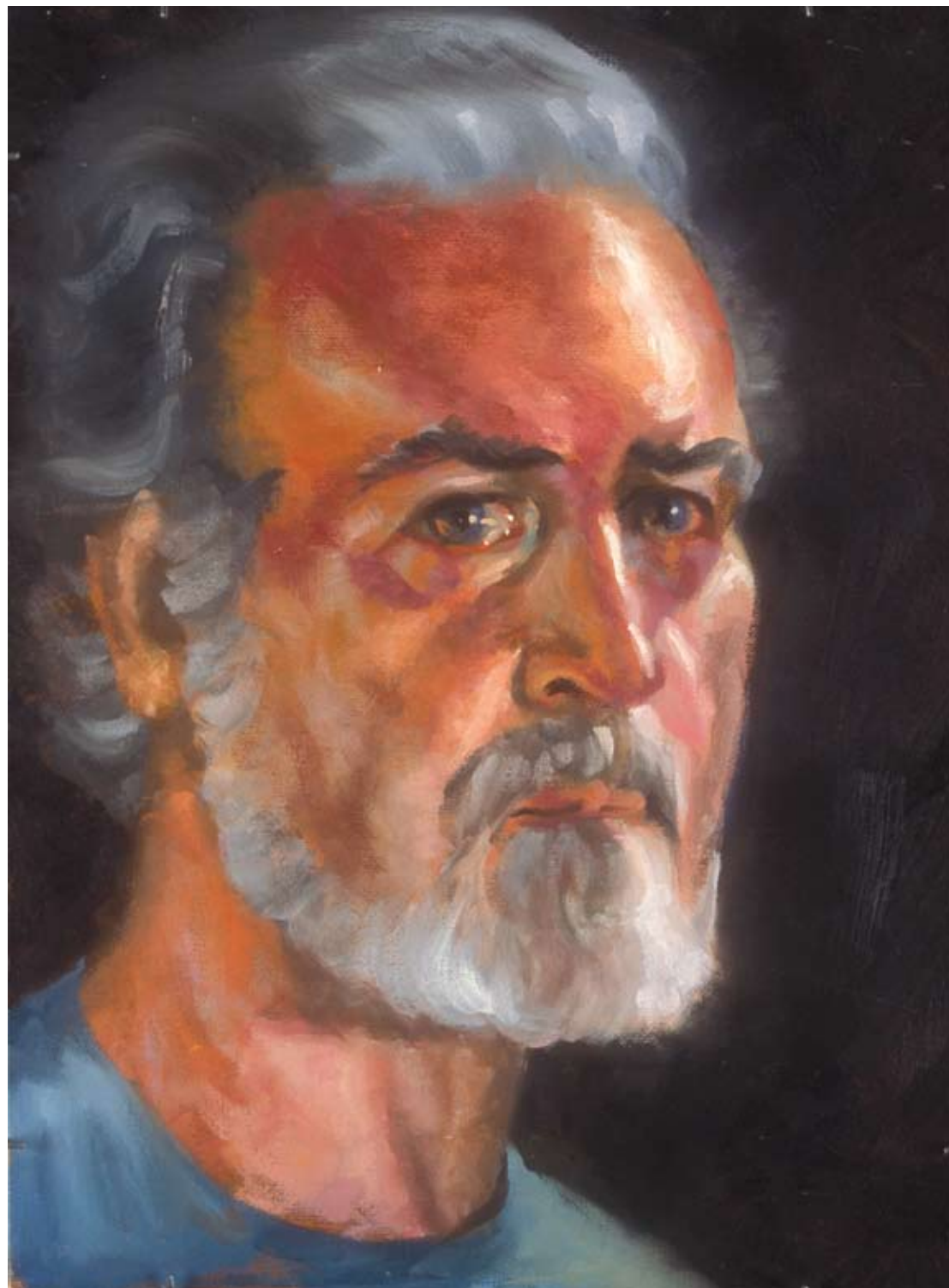
Founder: “Multi-Cultural Visions Through the Arts”,
NYC Teacher Enrichment Program in the Fine Arts
Artist/Director, 1992–2002
Instructor: Marymount Manhattan College, NYC, Drawing & Painting 1990–1991
Frick Museum, NYC, Multicultural Visions Through the Arts,
NYC Teachers Program, 1995–2001
Central Park Historical Society Inner City Schools Program,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Artist Guide, 1989–1991
Crafts Student League of YWCA , NYC, Pastel Workshop Series, 1989

Lecturer: Roger Smith Gallery, NYC, 1995
New Jersey Secondary Schools, Department of Guidance
“Art As A Career” Workshop, 1968–72

Curator: Metropolitan Portrait Society, NYC, Selected Member Group Show,
Co-curator, 1987
Lenox Hill Artists Forum, NYC
“The Collector’s Eye”, May 1995
“A First Step Again”, January 1989

Consultant: International Art Catalogue Project, 1984
Sponsored jointly by: The Metropolitan Museum, NYC
The Louvre Museum, Paris, France
The National Gallery, London, England

Residency: Nantucket Island School of Design and the Arts, 1999
(Affiliated: Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, MA)



Self Portrait, 2000, Oil on board, 16 x 12 inches

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I describe myself as a “Romantic Realist” because I strongly hold the view that Nature is the manifestation of the life-giving force in the Universe, and that the rational, emotional, willful creature, the Human Being, is the greatest accomplishment of this power.

The artist is the aesthetic bridge between the Human Being and Nature. Therefore I paint my subjects from life, true to their visual images. In this way I can convey my immediate visual and emotional response to the unique qualities of my subject, in a manner that is as understandable as possible to the viewer, so that the viewer can have as close an emotional and intellectual experience as I have had, and then with further contact, draw deeper thoughts and personal realizations.

—George A. Rada

PHOTO CREDITS:

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