Perry House's Awkward Sublime

Essay by Guest Curator Tom Moody

An exciting, individualistic, perplexing body of work has been incubating slowly in the studio of Houston artist Perry House over the past couple of decades. The achievement may be as hard to recognize within the milieu of Texas in the '90s as the painter Philip Guston's was in New York in the 70's.

The eras share many similarities. In the aftermath of an expressionist feeding frenzy, painting is viewed with suspicion or considered old-hat by curators. The market is flat. Connoisseurship, or the ability to "read" a painting, goes against the pseudo-populist trend.

Guston showed how a small number of items significant to an artist—paintbrushes, cigarettes, shoes, lightbulbs—could be transformed into a rich iconography of "universal" elements. His obsessive return to his favored motifs and his willingness to play the fool in his cartoonish late work was his way of getting at the truth; he risked misunderstanding, scorn, and a career to pursue that old-fashioned goal. Posterity is bearing him out, but for many years he paid a heavy price for turning himself from a respected Abstract Expressionist into a "mandarin pretending to be a stumblebum," as Hilton Kramer called him in 1970.[1]

Perry House is one of a handful of artists working in Texas brave enough to take the same staggering footsteps. Individually his paintings risk being dismissed as random oddities in spite of formal and thematic virtues immediately obvious to other painters. Taken as a whole, his body of work is just as "conceptual" as the combinations of objects and photography currently in vogue with curators, but it doesn't lend itself so easily to one-line summaries in grant applications. You actually have to *think* about it.

All of House's paintings feature one or more members of his "cast of characters," an odd group of inanimate objects with open-ended meanings. Names assigned to each, such as The Bramble, The X-House, The Gate, The Throne/Chair, and so on, frequently appear in titles of works. Selections from this catalog of images pop up again and again in House's *ouevre* but they're never painted the same way twice. In a restless process of imaginative mutation, his **characters** are fragmented and distorted, depicted from odd perspectives, cropped, blurred, partially occluded, fused with quasi-Modernist stripes and dots, and hidden in webs of drips. Images are often painted over many times.

House worked for several years with a restricted palette, learning to build surfaces with integrity and depth using acrylic paint, which is quick-drying but clumsy and flat compared to oils. He discovered a way to glaze paintings with thin washes of black to add depth to the polymer's chalky inert surfaces. He showed how building up layer after layer of acrylic yields a naugahyde-like surface that fits his irreverent sensibility. Using these same techniques he's recently reintroduced color to his work and the results have been impressive. House, it turns out, is a colorist *par excellence*.

Unlike his eccentric characters, there is nothing odd about House's color: it's actually quite seductive. This creates a comic tension, comparable to bumbling adolescents with bad hair walking around in exquisite haute couture. The characters are difficult to describe even if you know House's names for them. After he assiduously mixes and glazes his colors, they too defy language.

Stripped of their central imagery, the three canvases butted together in *The Fountain/The Dead Tree/The X-House* might be an arpeggio of blue, yellow, and green a la early Brice Marden. Grayed down with subtle washes of black these colors make a strong poetic statement. Without breaking the mood, House introduces three characters that sit resolutely within each square like specimens waiting to be dissected. The characters on the left and right are veined with House's characteristic scrollwork, an obsessive texture recalling the ubiquitous wrought iron of the Old South. The Dead Tree in the center appears stiff and stylized on its pedestal, more a statue than a thing of nature. The objects cast shadows in three different directions but all coexist in an ambiguous space.

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Houses's characters have an implacable quality, inviting and negating interpretation. In *The Table, The House (Red)*, an enormous clunky cartoon house festooned with red polka dots looms out of a background of subtle washy grays, dwarfing a scrollwork table in the middleground. A work on paper, *#4 (Brown)*, depicts rectangular and circular forms hulking at the edges of a brownish void like a modernist Scylla and Charybdis. A filament of elongated green scrollwork hangs suspended between them, throwing a long shadow. These preposterous configurations have a way of lodging insidiously in one's memory.

The theatrical shadows, uncanny architecture, and lonely mood of many paintings recall surrealism and the Scuola Metafisica of De Chirico, but these trappings aren't intended as literal references to past art. Although House's characters have real-world parallels and are depicted using chiaroscuro, perspective, and other tricks of rendering, they are nonetheless *abstractions*, starting points for a process that follows its own skewed logic to completion. Along the way ideas change, intriguing surfaces build up, unexpected color combinations occur.

Linkages between events in House's life and his characters aren't as obvious as Philip Guston's use of autobiographical motifs as metaphors for the lonely-painter-as-Everyman. If House's characters are pictograms we aren't meant to decode, why use them? Also, why restrict himself to inanimate objects instead of human or animal subjects? A psychological reading of the work might treat the objects as fetishes that replace humans (mother, father, lovers) as objects of feeling, but one could say the same things about Chardin's still lifes or Morandi's bottles. The question of why an artist uses a certain subject matter is ultimately less interesting than what he does with it. In House's case, the characters are a way into the painting: markers on the way to the unattainable.

The word "sublime" crops up in thousands of gallery press releases as a handy synonym for "beautiful." Yet it has a very different meaning in philosophy. "The sublime sentiment...is according to Kant, a strong and equivocal emotion: it carries with it

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both pleasure and pain," says Jean-Francois Lyotard.[2] The Abstract Expressionists, in their quest to present the unpresentable, were very much concerned with the Kantian sublime. When House expresses his desire to explore "the fine line between humor and horror," he is talking about the same thing.[3] Again, a psychological reading might reduce the artist's humor to a mechanism for coping with the world's glut of car accidents, chemical spills, cancer, and other horrors. Such an interpretation would certainly demystify the work.

We live in a debunking age. To speak of a mystical quest in art is embarrassing. A built-in criticality in painting suits the spirit of the present. The mandarin pretends to be a stumblebum, anticipating and defusing criticism and thereby preserving the integrity of his art. What might strike a letter-of-the-law Abstract Expressionist like Clyfford Still as a mockery of painting is a matter of internal necessity to his successors. House's relentless production of paintings with faux-clumsy figuration, stubby brushwork, and leatherette textures represents his Holy Grail-like pursuit of a very awkward sublime. His impenetrable characters, less literal than Guston's, suggest that truth may be found not in the painter's studio but beyond, always out of reach.

[1]   Robert Storr, *Philip Guston* (New York: Abbeville Press 1986), p. 49.

[2]   Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" (1979) reprinted in *The Postmodern Reader*, ed Charles Jencks (London: Academy Editions 1992) p. 146.

[3]   Tom Moody, "Perry House," *Artforum* Vol. 31, No. 3, November 1992, p. 113.

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Tom Moody is a Dallas based artist and writer. He currently is a contributing writer for *Artforum* and is the Texas editor for *Art Papers*.