

Joseph Stashkevetch

Passage

Morris-Healy Gallery through October

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BY MARK DANIEL COHEN

ONE IMPULSE ON FIRST seeing the six large drawings in this exhibition, Stashkevetch's second solo at the Morris-Healy Gallery, is to label them Photorealism and leave it at that. But the designation would be a haggard compliment, and it would be unfair. Photorealism claims for the artist nothing more than a severe technical prowess — the ability to draw or paint so precisely that the artwork simulates the appearance of photography — and of course a stunning inefficiency: Why not just take a snapshot and save yourself a lot of work and us a lot of puzzlement over the artist's purpose? But some slow and concentrated looking discloses that there is more to Stashkevetch's renderings than merely these pallid virtues.

The drawings in this exhibition, selected by the artist, are based on black-and-white photographs taken by Stashkevetch of highway traffic around Los Angeles. The photos were reworked as large-scale drawings, executed in charcoal, Conte crayon, and watercolor. At first glance, all one sees is a remarkable reproduction of the photographic feel and a typically post-industrial fascination with the implicit

design virtues of the aging industrial scenario. (The artist's statement indicates that Stashkevetch has previously worked on "images of decayed industrial landscapes and abandoned amusement parks.")

But with further inspection the photographic illusionism breaks down, and something more interesting takes its place. One begins to notice that there are evident strokes of the drawing implements, visible marks that are apparently deliberate. The simulation of photo-grain becomes more clearly the graininess of the tooth of the paper brought up by the application of charcoal and crayon. This is highly traditional and sophisticated drawing technique, and with the recognition that one is viewing a tonal drawing (no line work) their "aura" changes. The drawings acquire the feel that Photorealism masks: the sense of being handmade objects, not mechanical reproductions.

In 1936, in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin defined the "aura" of a work of art as its quality of uniqueness, of being one of a kind, a quality that Benjamin felt was lost with mechanical reproduction and its potentially endless stream of instances. With photography, with film, there is no original, no "one of a kind" instance. Yet, it seems at this time that the concept of the aura should be broadened to accommodate a variety of types. To pick up another Benjamin concept, every medium in which art is practiced compels a distinctive "organization of perception," and thus can be said to have its own feel, its own identity, its own *aura*. Every art medium coordinates the perceptual senses in its own manner. This is merely to say that a painting always looks and feels like a painting; a photo always looks and feels like a photo. (More than a few writers who have cited the concept of the aura recently have taken it to mean this —

that each art medium has its own distinguishable quality. They are inaccurate in attributing the idea to Benjamin, but their view is sensible.)

When Stashkevetch shifts the aura in his work, it is a reversal; the drawings one expects to look like photographs suddenly look like drawings. In particular, they take on the texture and tactile sensation of a Seurat sketch. Highway pillars, for instance, bear long stretches of dark body shadow that start to resemble the heavily toothed fields of near black that Seurat could manage to create with the same drawing tools. This is an enormous virtue: Seurat was one of the masters of the Conte crayon, and Stashkevetch's works in this exhibition warrant the comparison.

The strength of meaning in these drawings is not due specifically to the shift of the aura, but in the fact that the shift is done by a hair. These six images locate themselves right on the cusp, as if suspended between two worlds, between the real and the rendered, between the realized and the conceptualized. Looked at once, they are nearly photos; looked at again, they are clearly what they really are, drawings. And the impression they create comes from a fusion of the two realms. Photography commands our uncritical faith: The camera doesn't lie; we believe what we see. In Stashkevetch's works, the images are granted the credence of the documentary photo, and they reveal the world to have the quality of a drawing — the world is shown to be a handmade object, everything we experience is something we have created. It is as if we now know for a fact that there are no facts, all that we experience as real is a fabrication of our own design.

There is something of Kant in this: the conception that all experience

exists in the mind and is a function of the mind, and that we have no exposure to the nature of the world as it is unto itself. We can know what we experience only as it comes to us filtered, with forms imposed upon it by our modes of awareness. But even more, there is something of Nietzsche in this — Stashkevetch demonstrates a world with the quality that Nietzsche claimed for it: the world as an aesthetic object, reality as a work of art. The presence of this kind of thinking would be moderately surprising if it were not for the pedigree of the thought. The idea of the world being an aesthetic object is a variant on a concept frequently taken up in the arts: the concept of the *Sublime* — the assertion that art reveals the truth of things, that the quality of art that makes it beautiful is the quality that also makes it a window onto the ultimate reality. The six images in this

exhibition can be said to create a simple impression: Photograph the world and, when you develop the film, what you unearth will be an artist's sketch.

Nevertheless, these images are finally somewhat dissatisfying. Works that reside on the cusp between apparent photography and evident drawing in the end aren't enough of either. And the more interesting of the two manners, at least to this observer, is the drawing. Stashkevetch's drawing style is strong enough that I want to see it employed purely and to its own ends, I want to see it unshackled from the restraints of near photographic realism. I want to see more of it. This kind of art can of course be considered regressive, and an increased emphasis on drawing would make it more regressive. The worth of Photorealism is to erase the distinctive touch of the artist's hand, to eradicate, or if one likes,

deconstruct, the suggested uniqueness of the artistic object and, with it, the imperious authority of the artist as the self-reliant creator. Beyond the evidence of technical facility, there is nothing of the artist left, there is nothing "artistic" remaining. Photorealism is a species of anti-art.

But there are some of us avidly observing contemporary art who desire that touch of the hand, who abide the thumbprint of the creator. There are some of us who believe in the strength of the individual vision and in the idea that individual vision requires the individual's touch.

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