

THE AESTHETE IN THE CITY

THE PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF AMERICAN ABSTRACT PAINTING IN THE 1980s



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Descriptive Abstraction: Ron Janowich's Recent Paintings

Several years ago there was a revival of interest in abstract painting. But although some individual painters became well known and there were many groups shows, little serious thought about abstraction was in evidence. Indeed, apart from a sequence of unjustly neglected articles published a decade ago in *Artforum*, I know of no good sustained discussion of post-Greenbergian abstraction.¹ With one exception—the 40th Biennial at the Corcoran in Washington—none of the group shows I had the opportunity to see were effective, even when some of the individual works displayed were excellent.² Where Impressionist landscapes or baroque paintings mutually enhance one another, abstract works do not easily love one another. Most abstractionists do better when their works are seen in relative isolation. Why is this the case? Unless our artwriters can provide some ways of understanding abstraction, our artworld—whose attention span is never very long—will merely await the next fashionable movement.

1. I refer to Joseph Masheck's "Iconicity" articles reprinted in his *Historical Present: Essays of the 1970s* (Ann Arbor, 1984), chaps. 16–20.

2. See my review, "40th Biennial: Corcoran," *Burlington Magazine* (July 1987): 483–84.

These group shows and discussions with David Reed provoked me to think about the diverse ways recent abstraction uses the materials provided by art's history. While such very different figures demonstrate how rich and diverse contemporary abstraction is, artwriters have not found any really effective way of describing their achievement. There is something perverse in the fact that even as abstract artists aspire to work in the great tradition of American painting, the writings of the most fashionable theorist, Jean Baudrillard, have been interpreted by his best-known American followers as denying that there can today be abstract art.³ But whatever the sociological interest of artworks that claim to "represent" the structures controlling the circulation of signs in postmodern society, few I have seen really deserve much attention as art. As Ron Janowich has said, "signs are not paintings," and if we accept this distinction then the real question is how to understand genuine contemporary abstractions. Nobody is willing now to return to a Greenbergian analysis, but whatever the defects of formalism it did provide a specifically visual analysis, which is missing in most recent artwriting.

One model for postformalist accounts that is sensitive to historical issues is Gilles Deleuze's reading of Francis Bacon. "The manner in which grand painting . . . recapitulates the history of painting is never eclectic. It doesn't correspond directly to periods of painting. . . . It corresponds rather to separable aspects in the picture."⁴ My present discussion of Janowich's work, which both contrasts it to some earlier abstract art and links it with an earlier tradition of representation, borrows from Deleuze. If now abstraction is to be something more than just one of the almost endless number of styles open to an artist in this age of pluralism, then a historical perspective is needed. How can an artist like Janowich build upon and extend art's traditions?

Much can be learned about any abstract painter by asking what old masters she or he responds to most deeply. Posing this question is one way of providing the needed historical framework. Knowing of Sean Scully's interest in Duccio's *Maestà*, I could understand his concern with frontally placed, fundamentally flat images. His art has a lot to do with early Johns, and—contrary to what has been claimed—has no relation to what in bad reproductions it may slightly resemble, Stella's very early stripes. Reflecting upon David Reed's fascination with the colors and ambiguous space of Beccafumi

3. See Chapter 5, above.

4. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation* (Paris, 1984), 87.

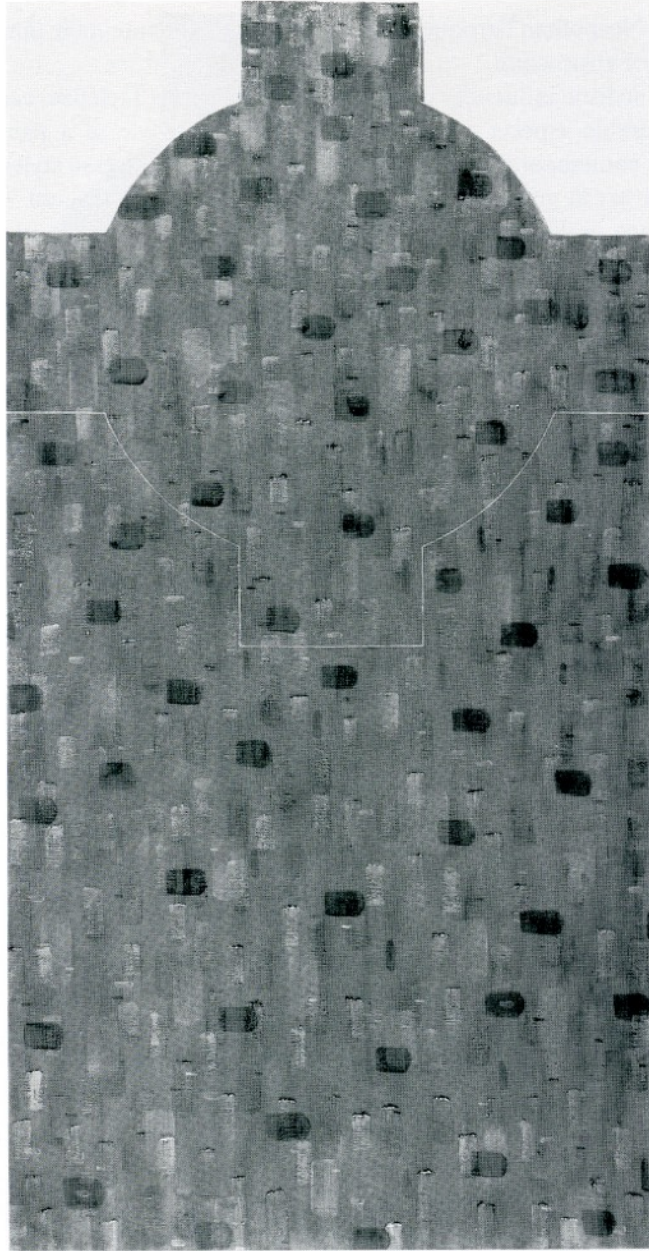


Fig. 5. Ron Janowich, *Hymnuss (VIII)*, 1987. Collection of the artist

and the Neapolitan baroque, I could grasp his fundamentally opposed conception of abstraction.

Such stylistic influences constitute what, following Deleuze, can be called the separable aspects or, as I prefer to say, the style of a painting. It is because contemporary abstract artists draw on such diverse styles that mixing their art in group shows is usually a mistake. No museum would willingly place its Venetian paintings in the same room with its post-Impressionist works. With those older masters, period labels provide a good indication of stylistic affinities: the works of Titian and Tintoretto go together, and even the paintings of such opposed contemporaries as Gauguin and Cézanne enjoy each other's company. With a contemporary abstraction this is not the case, for this art employs a diversity of styles.

The failure of these recent group shows thus demonstrates a failure to understand the nature of style in contemporary abstraction. Our abstract artists are influenced by art of many different periods, and so grouping their work under the rubric "recent abstractions" is not wise. When I speak of such influences I am not thinking of image appropriations, which almost always involve a trivial conception of what is to be learned from the past. I am interested in how an artist forms a style by learning from earlier art. Since the style of an artist's work is not defined by its appearance, stylistic affinities are not determined merely by visual similarities.⁵ What counts, rather, is an artist's conception of how earlier masters have used the medium in ways that now are relevant to art. Were some museum to ask me to curate a show of recent abstraction, I would seek to display stylistic affinities and differences. Put Scully alongside Johns; place Reed next to a Siense mannerist; juxtapose Quaytman to Malevich. Much could be learned about the quality of contemporary art and its range of stylistic possibilities from such an exhibition.

In this imaginary exhibition I would place Ron Janowich's work next to a late Rembrandt. When I first met Janowich a few years ago, he spoke with enough passion about Rembrandt to send me to Amsterdam to look at the works of an old master who had never especially interested me. I learned something about Rembrandt and, what here is more immediately relevant, came to understand what in him attracted a young painter working in New York. Since Janowich is not painting portraits, scenes from sacred history,

5. Here I borrow from Richard Wollheim, "Style Now," in *Concerning Contemporary Art: The Power Lectures, 1968–1973*, ed. B. Smith (Oxford, 1975), chap. 5.



Fig. 6. Ron Janowich, *Untitled*, 1987. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. George Baril

or landscapes, what meaning could the techniques of an old master have for him? The painterly technique of Rembrandt's later works will attract modern observers; our eyes have been trained on Soutine and de Kooning. But there is something more specific to Janowich's interest in Rembrandt: he is fascinated with Rembrandt's use of oil paint to create finely textured, glistening surfaces, and especially with *Slaughtered Ox*.

If Janowich uses paint to create textured light, his stretchers, which support symmetrical, visually stable compositions, suggest trecento altarpieces. This is especially true of the small works. Here again Deleuze's notion that we consider the separable aspects of painting is helpful. Certainly Janowich is aware of these precedents, and part of the richness of his own works consists in bringing together this "primitive" frontalism and Rembrandtesque, textured light. But the resulting effect is certainly not additive. Just as he is not concerned with Rembrandt's interest as a history painter, telling a story, so there is nothing especially sacred, to my way of thinking, in this invocation of altarpiece format. It is true, I grant, that Janowich, like the trecento painters, wants us to attend closely to a shaped structure, but that parallel does not take us very far. Trecento sacred works echo their intended setting, the architecture of churches, while the natural home of abstract paintings is the visually neutral space of a gallery; for Janowich implied architectural references must function differently. Just as his abstract painting itself carries no specifically sacred references, though it may borrow techniques from sacred art, so the change in setting means that these allusions to the shape of altarpieces have art-historical but not religious meaning.⁶

A better way of understanding what is distinctive about Janowich's works comes from contrasting them to other recent abstract paintings that use shaped stretchers. Whether he uses a rounded semicircle at the top of the picture or a horizontal bar cutting across a diamond, his shaped frames have very little to do with the shaped frames used by Noland or Stella in the 1960s. They, Michael Fried observed, used the shaped frame to create a novel kind of illusionism. Where in a traditional painting illusionism involves ambiguous depth, here shape itself becomes ambiguous. What we seem to see as a triangle penetrating into a square in a 1960s' Stella *really is* an oddly shaped polygon. That frame draws attention to itself. Indeed, in a sense the painting is entirely defined by that frame. For Janowich this is not

6. Stella writes: "Caravaggio put architecture back into its antique place . . . he . . . moved it backstage so that it would not interfere with pictorial drama" (Frank Stella, *Working Space* [Cambridge and London, 1986], 33). In my opinion, this ahistorical misinterpretation of baroque art explains why Stella's own *literal* space in his art of this decade is generally unsuccessful.

the case. His shaped frames are good gestalts, symmetrical forms that, without dramatically calling attention to themselves, serve to enclose color.

Color in 1960s' color-field painting, Janowich has complained, lacks emotional or spiritual content. Leo Steinberg described Noland's late-sixties' pictures as "the fastest I know." That may help explain why this art lacked staying power.⁷ Because the color was just a filler for a shape, it was not worth prolonged attention. A more interesting use of the frame, worth describing here because of the contrast with Janowich's, is provided by the recent work of Harvey Quaytman. He plays areas of color against the rectangular shape of his frames, which sometimes are turned ninety degrees to make diamonds. Quaytman uses the frame in order to illusionistically extend the implied picture space beyond the boundary of his frame. For Janowich, the frame itself can be visually inert because it is the boundary of color.⁸

Within that frame, there often appears a drawn semicircle echoing the shape of the top of the frame. And in the more recent works, and most especially in the monotypes, painterly gestures run across that space within the frame. The monotypes, Janowich has acknowledged, have had a major influence on his more recent painting. Because he could not glaze them, they allowed or forced him to learn to give his marks greater freedom. And so now the range of stylistic possibilities within the recent paintings has been enlarged. Some works use areas of color, such as a red-on-red square, within a polygon; a number of others allow white or black marks to run across the canvas in a very free way. *Shadow Dust* displays one of Janowich's most interesting stylistic possibilities, the use of an allover pattern with the shaped stretcher. His recent art opens up numerous directions for exploration.

Lines drawn inside and echoing the shape of the picture frame appeared in some earlier American abstract painting, where they played a different role. In Motherwell's images, Joseph Masheck has noted, a depicted rectangle serves as both "a pictorial reference to painting and an abstract allusion to the way a painting hangs down on the wall against the pull of gravity."⁹ Janowich's paintings appear as heavy as they really are, and so have no need to allude in this way to the force of gravity. For him, this element of the painting has a different meaning. Whether his markings echo the shape of

7. Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," reprinted in his *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York, 1972), 80.

8. See my "Harvey Quaytman's Recent Paintings," Galerie Nordenhake (Stockholm, 1987).

9. Joseph Masheck, "Pictures of Art," reprinted in *Historical Present*, 184.

the frame, or conversely, in some recent works, deny its shape, in either case they function to create a place within that frame which demarks light from darkness. Here is an element he borrows from Rembrandt. He renders abstractly working *across and into the surface* of his painting, where Rembrandt shows a movement of shadowed forms *into depth*. Janowich's frames are containers; they appear to hold that source of illumination which irradiates the entire picture space.

This effect is not unfamiliar in earlier old-master art. Describing light and texture in fifteenth-century painting, Gombrich writes: "The painter will have more scope for light-effects the darker he keeps the general tone of the picture. He must sacrifice his enjoyment of bright colours if he is to suggest brightness."¹⁰ On the whole, Janowich too sacrifices bright colors to display his illuminated textures. Since his paintings look very different from those Gombrich is discussing, what does it mean to identify such relationships between Janowich's concerns and those of some quattrocento masters? Meyer Schapiro's friendships with the French and American modernists in the 1940s inform his writing. Discussing a seventh-century carving, the *Ruthwell Cross*, he replied to a critic who asked whether Schapiro's characterization of the carved figure as a secular image did not imply that it was merely decorative: "If by that he means to say that I deny to the figure any value or significance beyond the contribution of its form to the rhythm of lines and of light and dark on the Cross, he misunderstands me. . . . The alternatives are not . . . religious meaning or no meaning, but religious or secular meanings, both laden with affect."¹¹ Analogously, I am saying when I compare Janowich's paintings to Rembrandt's, the alternatives are not either to seek representational meaning or to find no meaning, but rather to look for explicit representational meaning *and* meaningful abstract forms, *both* laden with affect. Since the meanings of his stylistic elements are defined by the history of their use, here a more extended historical perspective is essential.

Starting with Vasari, a good deal of art-historical writing is concerned to distinguish Northern and Italian art. Within old-master art there are two ways of narrating the depicted story: the Italian manner, in which what is outward—gestures and facial expressions—expresses the inner emotion

10. "Light, Form, and Texture in Fifteenth-Century Painting," reprinted in E. H. Gombrich, *The Heritage of Apelles: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 1976).

11. Meyer Schapiro, "The Religious Meaning of the Ruthwell Cross," reprinted in his *Late Antique, Early Christian, and Mediaeval Art: Selected Papers* (New York, 1979), 179–81.

proper for a story; and the Northern tradition, which refuses to employ that manner of narration. If this contrast characterizes Northern painting in a merely negative manner, that too reflects a long tradition, as Gombrich indicates in his description of Wölfflin's lectures that he attended as a student: "Once and again an Italian work of classical poise appeared on one screen to be contrasted on the other with a German work which lacked these characteristics."¹² Because Vasari's account of Italian art is *the* model for art history, it is natural that his successors would employ such a contrast.

Here Rembrandt occupies a special role, for he, the most Protestant of Protestants, refused to travel to Italy. What his art reveals, it is commonly said, is an inner spiritual world whose depth is unknown to the Italians. "Rembrandt opened a new field . . . the world which lies behind visual appearances . . . the sphere of the spirit, of the soul."¹³ The nineteenth-century painter and artwriter Eugène Fromentin expresses this idea: "For physical beauty he substituted moral expression . . . for clear, wise, simple observation, the visionary's glimpse. . . . Thanks to this somnambulist's intuition, he saw farther into the supernatural than anyone else."¹⁴ Behind these two conceptions of pictorial narration lie deeper cultural differences. As Wölfflin writes in this published account of the lectures Gombrich attended, "every concept of form has a spiritual content."¹⁵ The Italians love physical beauty. Perhaps they remain pagans at heart, since for them beautiful bodies express the beautiful soul within. The Northerners are unafraid of showing what is ugly.¹⁶ Rembrandt's Northern Protestant interest in the spiritual world can then be contrasted to the manner in which his Roman contemporary, Poussin, worked.¹⁷ Rembrandt is a portraitist of the soul it-

12. E. H. Gombrich, "Norm and Form," reprinted in his *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London, 1966), 92.

13. Jakob Rosenberg, Seymour Slive, and E. H. ter Kuile, *Dutch Art and Architecture, 1600–1800* (Harmondsworth, 1972), 112.

14. Eugène Fromentin, *The Masters of Past Time: Dutch and Flemish Painting from van Eyck to Rembrandt*, trans. H. Gerson (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), 231.

15. Heinrich Wölfflin, *The Sense of Form in Art: A Comparative Psychological Study*, trans. A. Muehsam and N. S. Shatan (New York, 1958), 226. Similarly, consider the contrast of "two modes of sensibility . . . the Mediterranean and the Anglo-Saxon. . . . One favors a reserved and tight-lipped style . . . while the other gives way unashamedly to passionate outcries and vehement gestures" (Jonas Barish, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* [Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1981], 245). Every modern tourist is aware of this contrast.

16. In his etching *The Good Samaritan*, Rembrandt shows a large defecating dog in the foreground. Goethe wrote an extended commentary on this work, "Rembrandt as a Thinker," which manages to avoid mentioning that dog; *Goethe on Art*, ed. J. Gage (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980), 207–9.

17. See my "Circa 1640," *New Literary History* 21 (1990): 649–70.

self; Poussin seeks outward bodily signs—gestures and facial expressions—which will best convey the inner feelings of his depicted figures. Gombrich makes this point when he observes that in Rembrandt's *St. Peter's Denial* "it is the absence of any 'theatrical,' that is, of any unambiguous gesture, which . . . makes us read this drama in terms of inner emotions. . . . We increasingly project more intensity into these calm gestures and expressions than we are likely to read into the extrovert gesticulations of the Latin style."¹⁸

This contrast between two techniques of visual narrative is relevant to contemporary art. Postmodernism—in the images of Fischl, Salle, and Sherman; in the texts of John Ashbery, Maurice Blanchot, or Bob Perelman—involves a refusal to present stories with a clear beginning, middle, and conclusion in the Italian manner. Narratives are elliptical, ironical deconstructions of a form that no longer seems viable. Poussin, he said in a famous letter, wanted his pictures to be read. He meant that literally. In *Israelites Gathering Manna in the Desert* we can read the responses of the people to the miracle. Some are thankful, others just greedily grasp the manna, still others do not yet comprehend the miracle.

Salle is our anti-Poussin. As many commentators remind us, the sequence of events in his narratives never becomes clear. The way in which postmodernism is engaged in the deconstruction of the traditional story is by now well understood. Offer clues that refuse resolution and do not allow narrative closure; display scenes whose relationship is intentionally ambiguous; present layers of almost meaningful imagery. What has, however, not been discussed is the possibility of a postmodernist extension of the anti-Italian, or Northern, tradition. This Janowich's art provides.

Just as we no longer believe that painting or literature can engage in such storytelling as Poussin provides, so also we doubt that any image can express inner states through outer expression. The soul or the mind is inside the body, and in that metaphorical way of thinking expression involves expressing, making outwardly visible what was hidden inside. The artwork can be expressive because it is akin to a person. What is on the surface expresses what is inward. In a person, that ex-pressing involves gestures and physiognomy.

"Just as the artist is made up of a physiognomic exterior and an inner psychological space, the painting consists of a material surface and an interior which opens illusionistically behind that surface."¹⁹ Seeing Rem-

18. E. H. Gombrich, "Action and Expression in Western Art," in *Non-Verbal Communication*, ed. P. A. Hinde (Cambridge, 1972), 389.

19. Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York, 1977), 256.

brandt's portrayal of emotions, Gombrich implies, is like understanding the "inner world" of another person. For the contemporary reader, what now seems archaic or even incomprehensible in the older accounts of Rembrandt are the invocations of some higher inner or spiritual world. As such different commentators as Krauss and Fredric Jameson have pointed out, that concept of expression presupposes what Jameson calls "a whole metaphysics of inside and outside."²⁰

How can we understand Rembrandt's art when we give up this model? The recent accounts prepare us to understand how Janowich's work draws on his style. In an article that deserves attention from art critics, Svetlana Alpers contrasts art of narration with what she calls art of description. Like Wölfflin, she is interested in contrasting Northern and Italian art. In opposition to the Italian narrative tradition, art of description involves "a suspension of narrative action . . . a deliberate suspension of action achieved through a fixity of pose and an avoidance of outward expression . . . combined with an attention to the description of the material surface of the world."²¹ Courbet, Manet, and Rembrandt are involved with this tradition. In an art of description, the paint is the medium through which emotion is communicated. Now, as was not the case earlier with Wölfflin or even Gombrich, we have a *positive* characterization of Northern art. Alpers is telling us what Rembrandt does, not merely saying what he does not do.

For Rembrandt, paint is rather "something worked as with the bare hands. . . . Paint is acknowledged as that common matter, like the very earth itself in the biblical phrase, out of which the figures emerge."²² Far from being spiritual, his art involves a materialist display of the qualities of that physical stuff. When we deny that the self is constituted by some inner world of the soul, this is a highly suggestive claim. Earlier commentators thought of his many self-portraits as displaying the rich inner world of his feelings. But far from thus displaying depth in his later works, Alpers argues, it is rather that Rembrandt "closes in—identifying self, himself, with his painting."²³ This claim interests Janowich.

The kind of literal presence that Alpers finds in Rembrandt attracts Jan-

20. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1984): 61.

21. Svetlana Alpers, "Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Representation," *New Literary History* 8, no. 1 (1976): 15.

22. Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago and London, 1983), 225–27.

23. Svetlana Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market* (Chicago and London, 1988), 115.

owich, who wrote in 1981 that in these artworks “moments of elevated painting activity became meditations on the limitless potential of perceptual growth.” Here, as in new abstract painting, he suggested, “the sensation of seeing is referred to as well as reconstructed on the canvas.” I would explicate this comment by returning to his earlier complaint about color-field painting. “In a painting that has a flat color, where there is no surface variation of structural density, the specific area of a given color would be seen the same, be it with one eye or two.” Janowich wants to get away from this essentially monocular abstraction. What he admires about Rembrandt is how he calls for a deeper response. His “paint itself did that in a completely abstract way.”²⁴ If early abstraction is thus all too traditional in its use of depth, then perhaps art can now best proceed by looking backward. The trouble with Olitski’s work, Janowich has remarked, is that the material is detached from emotion; his paintings have no “inner core.” As we might expect from an admirer of Rembrandt, he finds this painting lacking in physical presence.

In a highly personal account, a remarkable anticipation of Alpers’s discussion, Jean Genet wrote: “When our eyes rest on a painting by Rembrandt . . . our gaze becomes heavy, somewhat bovine. Something holds it back, weighty force. . . . Rembrandt no longer denatures the painting by trying to merge it with the object or face that it is supposed to represent: he presents it to us as distinct matter that is not ashamed to be what it is.”²⁵ Contrary to what a false idealism would have us believe, mere matter itself possesses a dignity worthy of sustained attention. What Rembrandt’s pigments demand is a patient viewer, one who is willing to let his or her eye probe into depth. That probing involves, first and foremost, a seeking out of the content of that picture. Here we come to a key question about abstraction: What value is provided by focusing attention on one separable element of old-master art? If Janowich uses one element of Rembrandt’s technique, does that not mean that his work employs but one element of the many that concern that master?

24. I quote from his unpublished “Aspects of the New Painting: The Depth Phenomena” (1981).

25. I quoted the translation by Bernard Frechtman published in *Antaeus* 54 (1985): 113–16, which does not replicate the double columns in which Genet’s discussion of his recognition that “every man is all others” is juxtaposed with his evocative narrative about Rembrandt. This parallel is all the more remarkable because, so Svetlana Alpers kindly informs me, she had not read this text when she wrote *Rembrandt’s Enterprise*.

One good way to understand the mood of the artworld in the early 1980s is to refer to the concerns about anxiety of influence and belatedness as they have been described by the literary critic Harold Bloom.²⁶ Either an artist is stronger than his precursors, or they will crush him. (In his Oedipalized history it is natural to identify that artist as a male.) One response to this situation is to appropriate images. If we can create nothing new, then the most we can do is acknowledge the power of what went before. Janowich's different goal is to achieve a physical engagement as an "emotional complexity that will give the viewer something back." Is this possible with works that in one obvious sense seem to contain so much less than Rembrandt's: no depicted figures, no explicit sacred references, no storytelling?

Here I cannot do better than repeat what Greenberg wrote more than three decades ago. "More or less in art do not depend on how many varieties of significance are present, but on the intensity and depth of such significance, be they few or many, as are present."²⁷ Here artwriters, like artists, need to deal with the question of belatedness. In the 1960s, some artwriters became known as close followers of Greenberg, while others violently rejected his claims. Now, two decades later, a more measured view of his achievement is possible. It is easier for me to admit that I greatly admire Greenberg, and so am prepared to borrow from him, even as I explain why I do not think that all parts of his view of abstraction are still convincing. Just as Janowich can selectively use the history of art, so I propose to employ those artwriters' texts that still inspire conviction.

But since experience tells me that such historical comparisons as I here offer are readily misunderstood, the implications of this analysis need spelling out. The aim of my historical framework is to provide some categories that will help us to see Janowich's paintings. Unlike Bloom, I see the past not as a threat to the identity of the contemporary artist, but as a resource he or she can use. In this situation, nothing is gained by asserting that some younger artist is as great as an old master. That is merely a way of paralyzing discussion, and so of cutting us off from real experience of contemporary art. Janowich's small paintings and his monotypes ask us to look into a space momentarily accessible only to one viewer; his large paintings, reminiscent in scale and in the frontally shaped frame of Renaissance altarpieces, use similar textures to create a very different relation of spectator to work. These works deserve sustained contemplation.

26. See my *Artwriting* (Amherst, Mass., 1987), 105.

27. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, 1961), 134.