



HORST GLÄSKER

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HORST GLÄSKER: Reflections on the art of conjury, the eye of the poet, and the clown as revolutionary by David Galloway

In the late 1970's Horst Gläser and his contemporaries stormed the Bastille of reductionist art and hoisted their own gaudy pennants from the battlements. Some even had the audacity to scrawl revolutionary tidings directly onto the impeccable walls. They were a motley crew, without generals or manifestos or a common language, but united in their determination to set fantasy and subjective experience at liberty. In the United States "New Image Painting" and "Pattern Painting" had signaled the coming revolt; Arte Cifra in Italy and Figuration Libre in France would soon provide European rallying points. Two pioneering exhibitions documented the new era in Germany — Les nouveaux Fauves: die Neuen Wilden at Aachen's Neue Galerie in 1980, and Bildwechsel at Berlin's Akademie der Künste in 1981. Monumental works by Horst Gläser were included in both shows. Their vigorous gestural style and exuberant palette clearly placed him in the mainstream of "the new painting."

Gläser's personal idiom, however, was even then distinguished by its sensitivity to the classic problems of painterly craft. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not seek to overthrow the lessons of the past but to put them at his service. Since 1975, when he devoted an entire year to the traditional genres of landscape and portraiture, his work has consisted of an ongoing dialogue - not just with the visual arts but with architecture and music, as well. Gläser's vision is thus characterized by the depth-of-field called for by the poet T.S. Eliot in his essay on "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In an attempt to define the authentic modernist temperament, Eliot argued that "We need an eye which can see the past in its place with its definitive differences from the present, and yet so lively that it shall be present to us as the present. This is the creative eye..."

There is, however, nothing programmatic in Gläser's use of the past — no coy historicism and no paraphrasing of celebrated masterpieces. His methods are intuitive, sometimes sporadic, often theatrical, always animated by a distinctive and contagious wit. He is, in short, that rare and cherished phenomenon: the artist as clown. And it is the clown's special gift to elaborate banalities in such a way that they reveal their inherent beauty and pathos. Such transformations require split-second timing and discriminating nuance; yet the onlooker's empathetic response is directly dependent on the apparent artlessness of the performance. The master-clown of our time is Joseph Beuys, and there is a compelling poetic logic to the fact that Gläser produced his first carpet-paintings and his grandiose, circus-style organ in the classroom Beuys was compelled to vacate at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie.

Gläser is best known for his overpainting of wallpaper and machine-made "oriental" rugs - found materials whose dominant patterns temporarily freed him from concern with structure and composition to concentrate on the primary act of painting itself. Yet it is no accident that these banal and garish products of an industrial age have a refined aesthetic heritage. Both made their way to Europe from the Near East, where nomadic tents as well as marble palaces were fitted with woven coverings for walls and floors. They provided insulation and added a richness of ornament that contrasted dramatically with the sere desert landscape. Whether produced from coarse wool or the costliest silk, they contributed to the spatial definition of a room, and only in the Renaissance was a distinction made between coverings for floors and those for walls. The latter might be velvet or brocade, embossed leather or paper, but the oriental fashion for elaborate ornamentation dominated. Major artists contributed designs for the hand-painted papers of the 18th century, with their panoramic landscapes and trompe l'oeil still-lives. Only an industrial production, however, could meet the waxing demands of the bourgeois parlor, and the rotary press would eventually churn out kilometers of brightly printed wallcoverings. As the gap between artist and technician widened, decorative standards were blurred. Rather than enhancing architecture, overblown flowers and aggressive geometric designs frequently produced optical confusion and claustrophobia; yet they remained an indispensable symbol of the well-appointed household.

Gläser's first wallpaper-paintings were made on the loose sheets contained in discarded sample books; his "Persian" carpets were retrieved from trash bins. They, too, were the decadent descendents of a fabled past - of the hand-woven silk carpets, with their subtly glowing tones, first brought to Europe in the Middle Ages. Through overpainting machine-made examples, Gläser restored their uniqueness, gave them again a fine-arts dimension, and simultaneously discovered a fresh medium for the experiments begun in his Italian Wanderjahr. "In the carpet paintings," he recalls, "I found an absolute access to painting itself. As I began to work it was like an act of meditation, in which I could truly comprehend the nature of red, of yellow, of blue, and the infinite possibilities for combining them." In a provocative analogy, he also compares the method to the Berber who sets up a frame and then drapes his tent over it: "The tent may vary in color and ornament, but the basic form is predetermined."

The meditative aspect of the work was enhanced by the slowness of the process itself; the coarse, absorbent material resisted the brush, and each separate area had to be built up painstakingly from successive layers of paint. Unlike the wallpaper studies begun in 1978, the carpets offered little opportunity for broad, gestural effects. In works like "Johann Sebastian Bach-Carpet & New York Yellow" (1979), the total impression is elegantly restrained, though in other works the formal organization is disregarded at the border, where color spills playfully over the taut geometries. "The Berlin Carpet" (1978-79) not only shows a freedom to violate the strict compositional rules, but in the upper left-hand corner wears an impasto of sprightly footprints that establish a new autobiographical dimension. From this point, the mingling of art history with personal history becomes both a stylistic hallmark and a central motif.

Increasing confidence in his own skills as a painter led to greater expressiveness

within the compositional diagrams themselves. This formal inventiveness was further encouraged by the use of entire wallpaper rolls, randomly joined to a cloth background to form murals ranging from twelve to thirtyfeet in length. The painter's task was to resolve their conflicting colors and patterns into a single, unified composition. The expanded format projected an architectural dimension that the artist elaborated in an ambitious installation prepared in 1981. A continuous wallpaper-painting wrapped the room, and carpet-paintings covered the floor to produce a Gesamtkunstwerk that mirrored Gläser's recent interest in Pharonic Egypt. Earlier cultures, he realized, had not so much produced discrete works of art as total environments, in which walls and columns, furniture and household objects were harmoniously ornamented with tributes to gods, reflections on the natural world, the commemoration of historical events. In "Egyptian River Landscape" (1980), a central band of geometric shapes is handled as a series of television sets that show blurred, abstract vistas, with lush palm fronds waving overhead. Below, a border of exotic flowers parallels flowing curves suggestive of the river's stately movement.

Though wallpaper and carpets have a common architectural lineage, "Egyptian River Landscape" was the first painting to translate this allusion into spatial terms. Measuring over four meters in height and ten meters in length, it is more reminiscent of ancient frescoes than of the painted canvas. But despite the Pharonic allusions, the work has a more immediate source in the artist's own fascination with Tintoretto's "Il Paradiso" at the Doge's Palace in Venice. At the time of its completion, the canvas was the largest in the world, and it was totally integrated into the existing architecture. Gläser studied it for hours at a time, moving a few centimeters to the side, waiting, moving again, in order to comprehend the multifold aspects of Tintoretto's achievement. The experience strengthened the visitor's own conviction that the work of art should not reveal itself from a single vantage point; his own three-dimensional pieces would later amplify that principle.

Not only the scale of "Il Paradiso" but its ecstatic hymn to creation was sympathetic to Gläser's own messianic vision of the artist's role. Avoiding both sentimentality and didacticism, he speaks enthusiastically of the life-affirming message he wants to bring his viewers. He freely admits his Christian conviction and dreams of decorating a church, but would be equally happy "to paint the lobby of every major bank building in Düsseldorf" in protest against the concrete wilderness of the modern city. There is a clear sense of mission, too, in his repeated insistence that art should not be only ghettoized in galleries and museums but integrated with a larger human environment. Adapting available wall-space as the picture format is one step in this direction; the six-meter pointed columns produced in 1981 and 1982 were another.

The zeal to extend his art into the environment has resulted in increasingly larger works whose transport and storage present insurmountable problems for a young artist. With a quicksilver talent for improvisation and a restless critical energy, Gläser has resolved the dilemma by continuously cannibalizing his own earlier productions. Several of the over-dimensional wallpaper-paintings have been cut apart, reworked and sometimes recombined to form new composition; the soaring columns were halved. Throughout this aesthetic processing, a single printed wallpaper image is usually left free - anonymous, mass-manufactured witness to a hand-drawn, hand-colored original on which the serial production was based. All

around it are the layerings of Gläser's own successive transformations of the picture-plane. Recently he has scratched drawings into the fresh paint with the wooden end of his brush; as the damp surface is gouged open, it reveals the buried traces of earlier configurations, like a plow turning up shards of ancient pottery in a field.

With their metamorphosing beasts and priapic gods, Gläser's vigorous pictographs suggest the mythologies of Greece, Babylon and India. The recurrent figure of a leaping bull incarnates the ecstatic sexual energy that courses through all the "Universal Love Pictures" and the "Universal Love Columns." There is, however, no attempt to superimpose a systematic mythology on the composition; once more, the method is intuitive and associative. A general affinity for anthropology, fables and fairy-tales fuses here with a passionate interest in art history to produce an universal pictorial language. Its dominant themes are generation and regeneration. Hence, at the autobiographical level, these bright intaglios are reflections on the artist's idiosyncratic methods of composition; the faces of Gläser's "Love Gods" all flaunt his own distinctive profile. One critic has compared this idiom to the sensuous drawings of Picasso - an analogy that finds confirmation in the smaller, random works Gläser produces from studio refuse. With the most minimal means, a discarded palette or scrap of wood on which he has repeatedly wiped his brush is transformed into a fantasy landscape. Figures hastily cut from cardboard or plywood populate these miniature worlds, defining their physical scale and lending them in turn a vulnerable human context.

Whatever symbolic dimension such figures may suggest, their origin is to be found in the artist's private experience. This, he stresses, is "an experiential mythology," and he cites the genesis of the recent eagle cut-outs as a typical example. In 1979 Horst Gläser set up a temporary studio in a derelict warehouse near the Düsseldorf train station. In this vast, gloomy space, with rain leaking through the roof, he produced his first monumental works. The new format exhilarated him, but the decaying building with its impenetrable shadows occasionally depressed him, as well. To banish evil spirits, he cut the silhouette of an eagle from plywood, painted both sides in brilliant, contrasting colors, and hung it from the ceiling. As the mascot slowly revolved overhead, it constantly revealed first one of its ornamented faces and then the other. It appealed, therefore, to Gläser's own preference for works that can be read from a multiple vantage point. They received a further dimension through his decision to combine the positive form with the negative from which it had been cut. The front and back of each is covered with varying designs, then the eagle suspended within the stencil-like opening which gave him birth. As positive and negative revolve, they present seemingly endless combinations. This optical metamorphosis is the logical complement to Gläser's metamorphosing beasts and to the wallpaper paintings that have been repeatedly overpainted and then emblazoned with erotic intaglios.

Though the eagle is a near-universal symbol of courage, vision, majesty and strength, Gläser's incorporation of the figure in his own repertoire was more or less coincidental. But his ability to acknowledge the *felix culpa* and exploit it aesthetically is another indication of the immense fertility of his own artistic imagination. More recently, a powerfully lyric composition was randomly determined by work on the

elaborate "Universal Love Cupola." The domed form is supported by four male figures that stand on triangular pedestals, and these elements in turn determine the architectural proportions of the piece. Gläser experimented with various sizes, overpainting some of them to gain a feeling for the way color might supplement the sculptural dimension. In doing so, he had spread a protective section from an earlier wallpaper-painting on the floor, and when the figures were removed, they left behind "ghost" images that inspired him to create his "Dance of the Fertility Gods." Further "by-products" of this experimental phase included an ensemble of free-standing figures with front and back characteristically ornamented in opposing styles. "The gods always have two moods," Gläser insists.

The four supporting elements had meanwhile acquired their own distinctive personalities, and each assumed a ceremonial role: the Silver-Poplar Indian, the China-Rose God, the Pin-Oak Indio, the Apple-Blossom God. The drawings incised in their painted surfaces, based on illustrations from a botanical guidebook, reinforce the artist's plea for a new fusion between man and nature. To comprehend this aspect of Gläser's vision, it is necessary to study the pointillistic landscapes he produced in Italy in 1975-76; here, too, is the source of his feeling for the drama of color. The journey was undertaken after two years of wearying battle against the concepts of "Fundamental Painting" with which he was confronted at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie. The analytical exercises in composition seemed to bring him no closer to his painterly goals, and for a year he sought his own self-disciplined way in a tiny mountain village in Tuscany.

As subjects he chose classic exercises in portraiture and landscape, trudging across the countryside with an improvised easel whenever the weather permitted and setting himself explicit tests to train his hand and eye. There was no question of choosing picturesque, artistic vistas. Indeed, the perspective is often tilted to shut out the sky and frame a perfectly ordinary field, a dirt path, an outcropping of rock. On rainy days he worked at portraits "in the Italian manner" - first using photographs of his friends, then painting from life the villagers he lived among. The first appreciation came when he was trudging up a hillside and a local farmer wished him "Bona lavora" From that moment he was acknowledged as a workman among other workmen - each with his own tools, his own serious and traditional tasks to perform. By the end of his stay, the visitor had learned the grip of those tools. The last of the Italian landscapes show orchards in full bloom; they are lush, full, confident pictures that celebrate the earth's regenerative power.

During these eventful months, Horst Gläser had above all acquainted himself with the fundamental properties of color, and today he compares the experience to "limbering-up exercises for a dancer." It was also a farewell to his own career as a professional musician. At the age of fourteen, when he began his apprenticeship as a window-dresser, he also became a clarinetist in his brother's dance-band, and would continue to play professionally until the age of twenty-six. "We were a typical small-town combo," he remembers, "With suits and ties and glitter on the music-stands." Later Gläser took up harmonica and saxophone as well, concentrated on the blues.

The double-life continued after he had enrolled at the Kunstakademie, but the strain of painting by day and performing for much of the night exhausted him. The Italian

experiment was thus not only an attempt to come to an honest appraisal of his own painterly gifts, but to force the choice of art or music as a full-time career.

The choice ultimately (and predictably) had its own psychic repercussions for the work he produced in the atelier. One of the Italian pictures shows the shell of a ruined chapel where, with typical serendipity, Gläser discovered a group of organ pipes which he took back to Düsseldorf. Later he acquired more from a church scheduled for demolition, and for two years he considered possibilities for combining them all into a musical sculpture. The result was a circular "Step Organ" assembled in Beuys's vacant classroom in 1978. Rubber bulbs partially recessed into the floor replace the conventionally bellows, so that tones are produced by stepping across the piece or, literally, dancing across it. Gläser himself gave lively improvised concerts to accompany his first two museum exhibitions, but was amazed by the ease with which a young ballerina imposed her own very different style on the instrument during the 1980 Paris Biennale. Once more, the concept of metamorphosis infused material, theme, and reception of a work. The "Step Organ" and a "Luxury Harmonium" comprised farewell performances for the professional musician; they were also a declaration of his own triumphant metamorphosis into a painter. It was, after all, the first of his careers. He fondly recalls the visits made with his grandmother to the Dresden Zoo at the age of ten; there he filled entire notebooks with sketches of his favorite animals and, prophetically, with designs for carpets.

Since 1979, when he held his first one-man show in Germany, Horst Gläser has whirled dervish-like from one exhibition to another. The challenge of continuously producing new works for new spaces plainly invigorates him. He misses no opportunity to reiterate his life-embracing message, and no format seems to daunt him. In the summer of 1983, soon after completing the "Universal Love Cupola," he composed an earth-drawing on the level plain near Bari in southern Italy. Stunned by the immensity of the sky - "like a perfect, blue dome overhead" - he resolved to make a picture for the heavens. With three tons of the fine white gravel used in plazas and on cemetery walkways, he drew a vast circle on the dark earth. More than fifty meters in diameter, it is oriented to the points of the compass, with a bather facing to the east. A steer carouses among stars, fishes and acrobatic lovers, while a single eye stares upward into the unending sky. It is, perhaps, what Eliot understood as "the creative eye" of the artist, which brings about the wedding of past and present, myth and reality, heaven and earth.