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BOOK REVIEWS

SEEING FRENCH

BY TOM HUHN

DEBATE OVER WHAT precisely was at issue in French critical thought—and, indeed, in France itself—in the 1960s and '70s continues to this day. Curiously, however, much of the era's most prominent French painting, which was in its own time remarkably clear and explicit about the stakes (namely, the future of social and political life) seems to have no lingering presence. The wide renown of such thinkers as Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault contrasts sharply with the

the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the events of May 1968, Paris's Grand Palais hosted an exhibition titled "Narrative Figuration, Paris 1960-1972," which presented some 100 paintings, objects and films reflecting the tensions of those conflicted times. And now we have *The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations*, a new book in which Sarah Wilson, an independent curator and professor of contemporary art at the Courtauld Institute, London, makes a claim for the importance of a dozen or so largely overlooked French artists of the the period.

Nearly all these individuals were affiliated with the movement called Narrative



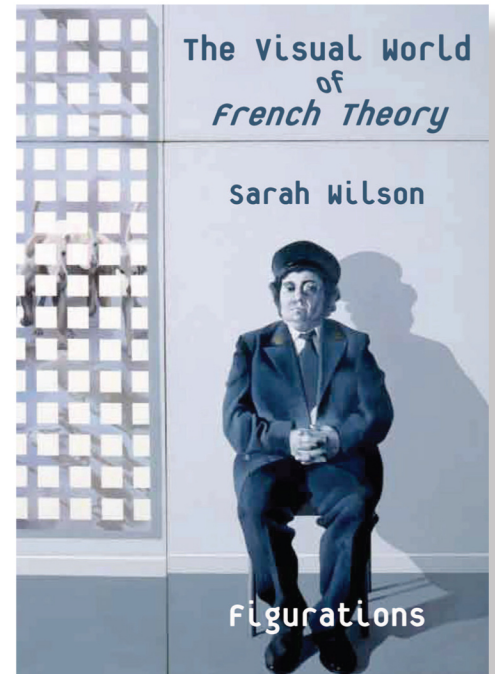
Gérard Fromanger: *The Artist's Life*, from the "Topino-Lebrun" series, 1972-75, oil on canvas, 78¾ by 118 inches.

relative neglect of many French artists who exhibited during the early heyday of theory. Outside France, and even more regrettably inside, such painters as Valerio Adami, Leonardo Cremonini, Ruth Francken and Gérard Fromanger remain sadly under-recognized. The verdict of history on what has come to be known as "French theory" as compared to that on contemporaneous French painting could not be more dissimilar.

Three years ago, however, this divergence began to close when, on

Figuration. (Volume two of Wilson's survey, covering subsequent decades and a much wider range of artistic and critical practices, is forthcoming.) Often drawing on pop culture, this school had a radical mission, manifest in its militant commitment to figuration, to sexually and sociologically volatile imagery and, sometimes, to collaborative works and collective political actions. As Wilson explains, Narrative Figuration

exemplified the last moment in France of grand history painting and the tradition of revolutionary romanticism. Its works are rich with critical satire, strategies of appropriation and a post-Situationist *détournement* [subversion]. It contained not a trace of skepticism about the value of its own painterly and critical enterprise.



The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations, by Sarah Wilson, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 2010; 271 pages, \$65.

RELATED PICKS

Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife, edited by Dudley Andrew with Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011; 384 pages, \$99 cloth, \$34.95 paper.

The Absence of Work: Marcel Broodthaers, 1964-1976, by Rachel Haidu, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2010; 392 pages, \$34.95 cloth.

Drawing on Art: Duchamp and Company, by Dalia Judovitz, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010; 320 pages, \$24.95 paper.

Philosophers on Art from Kant to the Postmodernists: A Critical Reader, edited by Christopher Kul-Want, New York, Columbia University Press; 416 pages, \$89.50 cloth, \$29.50 paper.

Yves the Provocateur: Yves Klein and Twentieth-Century Art, by Thomas McEvelley, Kingston, N.Y., McPherson & Company, 2010; 272 pages, \$27 cloth.

Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance: Art as Experiment, by Herbert Molderings, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010; 240 pages, \$27.50 cloth.

And yet the movement did not succeed in fostering, or even participating in, a revolutionary transformation of life; the moment when its ambitions might have been realized instead passed it by.

THE FAILURE OF Narrative Figuration to realize its sociopolitical goals does not absolve history from acknowledging that the movement existed. *The Visual World of French Theory* aims

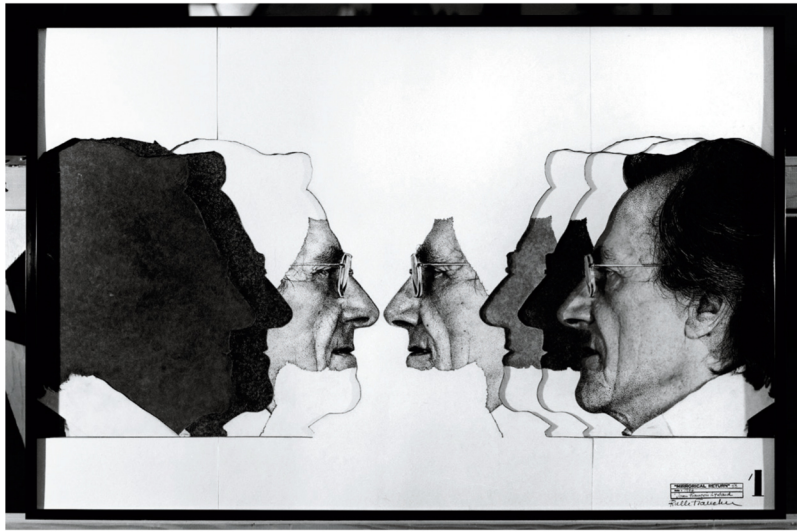
nating with the vocabulary then in vogue, the term “encounter” signals an important ambition of the book: to interpret the art as something other than mere illustration for contemporaneous critical theories.

Wilson’s study provides an opportunity to consider yet again the vexed relationship between word and image, this time within the heated and crackling context of French politics. Doing

THE WIDE RENOWN OF SUCH THINKERS AS ALTHUSSER, BOURDIEU, DERRIDA AND FOUCAULT CONTRASTS SHARPLY WITH THE RELATIVE NEGLECT OF THE ERA’S FRENCH ARTISTS.

of the day. She instead offers a reading of French art and theory that looks elsewhere for correspondences—in the unfolding of political positions within the French Communist party.

These diverse cultural alignments, transcending petty intraparty squabbles, constituted the very terms in which the most pressing political ideas were developed. Wilson succeeds in showing—without any criticism of theory—that the political disputes were often far more evident in the visual arts than in any discursive texts. Indeed it seems likely that she came to identify the political aspects of French theory through having first noted it in pictures. Her most significant historical move is to reveal this relationship between political notions expressed on the surface,



Above, Ruth Francken: *Lyotard* (detail), from the “Mirrorical Return” series, 1982-84, drawing on photographic fragments with mixed mediums, triptych, 3 by 13 feet overall. Musée d’art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg. Courtesy Emmanuelle Delaye.

Right, Jacques Monory: *Death Valley no. 1*, 1974, oil on light-sensitive canvas, 5½ by 16 feet. Private collection.



to rescue Narrative Figuration from the obscurity into which it has fallen. As her title suggests, Wilson argues that visual art of the period is in many cases best understood as inseparable from the widely admired theoretical writings then emerging. Moreover, she contends that the art actually helped *give shape* to those theories. She therefore structures each of her six chapters by detailing what she terms an “encounter” between a theorist and a painter—for example, between Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Monory, or between Derrida and Adami. Reso-

so entails an examination of the various roles that words and images play in the construction, and potentially revolutionary deconstruction, of everyday life. Indeed, one still vital legacy of French theory is the shaking of foundational certitudes about truth and meaning in all forms of discourse. We might, then, expect Wilson to find a counterpart to this dizzying destabilization in the images she wants to reevaluate. But the author confounds this expectation. She does not seek in the art any visual parallels to the sweeping reorientations advocated in the theoretical texts

as it were, in didactic images and those articulated more obliquely in the depths of theory. Wilson does not openly employ these terms or this dichotomy; indeed, she is at pains to show the continuities between visible form and theoretical expression. Nonetheless, the 125 illustrations in this volume clearly suggest just how propagandistic much of the “visual world” of French theory really was.

A rich example is found in the chapter on the “encounter” between the sociologist Bourdieu and the artist Bernard Rancillac. Bourdieu contributed an

essay, "The Image of the Image," to the catalogue for Rancillac's 1967 painting exhibition at the Galerie Mommaton in Paris. To appreciate Bourdieu's maneuver, one must keep certain historical circumstances in mind.

Partly because of the dominance of the Communist Party in post-war French intellectual life, the Americanization of the arts was

the mercantile motivation of a New York dealer's arrival in Paris: "The amiable Madame Sonnabend did not disembark in 1963 in Paris for the simple pleasure of looking at the Seine." [For more on Sonnabend, see article this issue.]

Bourdieu had long been one of the leading so-called anti-Communist Communists. He began as a protégé

WILSON'S BOOK REVEALS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL NOTIONS EXPRESSED ON THE SURFACE IN DIDACTIC IMAGES AND THOSE ARTICULATED IN THE DEPTHS OF THEORY.

George Plekhanov. Bourdieu writes of Rancillac's paintings:

A strange project. An art which uses the everyday language of comic strips, posters, or photographs. Frank colors which say frankly what they have to say, blue for sky, green for grass and red for blood. Themes as familiar as the poster you read in a flash in the metro corridor, a symbolism as transparent as in nursery tales or bad westerns, a revolver, crime, a wolf, violence. Intentions which are declared: to denounce racism, oppression, smug consciences. In short, an art which wants to reach out to the most art-deprived public.

But Bourdieu had done too much sociological research to allow himself to believe, with Rancillac, that any culture might even momentarily express itself transparently in art. The most that might be imagined is that artistic images would reflect the social images already in circulation. Then, ideally, the art might, reflexively, reveal the falsities of those original social constructs and thus denounce them.

PERHAPS THE MOST intriguing analyses are precisely those that examine art and artists not already chosen as winners in standard accounts. What to make, then, of Narrative Figuration, which came to be understood as a failure? Wilson wants to reclaim the value of Narrative Figuration by showing the extent to which it was entwined with the already historically validated French theory. In short, she contends that the art should be seen as important because of its relation to still vital philosophical and political critique.

But can't we also imagine that Narrative Figuration has value now because of the ways in which it failed, both as art and as revolutionary act? This would transfer the onus from Narrative Figuration to history. It is the latter which

failed to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of a brief moment 40 or 50 years ago. Yet even today those unfulfilled longings persist in the artworks that once gave appearance and voice to them. ○

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Bernard Rancillac: *Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Lieutenant Calley on the Road to My-Lai*, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 76¾ by 78¾ inches. Musée de Villeneuve-d'Ascq.

forestalled; this was doubtless also a strategy to keep the tsunami of American popular culture at bay. The onslaught of American painting included the first exposure in Paris, in 1959, of work by both Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. In 1963, Roy Lichtenstein had a solo show at Galerie Sonnabend. Peter Saul was a large figure while living and exhibiting in Paris in 1958-62. Hence Rancillac's acid comment on

of Raymond Aron, the most important French anti-Communist, but he had also, along with fellow theorists Derrida, Louis Marin and others, founded the anti-Stalinist Committee for the Defense of Freedom at the École Normale Supérieure. Bourdieu's 1967 essay considers Rancillac's solution to the problem of how to remain communist in intellect and aspiration while disavowing the Communism of Stalin (and, later, Mao) by adapting for art-making the pre-Stalinist "reflection theory" of