Sep 06, 2006 07:08 PM

The Jacob Collins interview

by James Panero

He's the figure head of Classical Realism, a painter with an anticipated exhibition at Hirschl and Adler in October, and the dean of two art schools. He's also the very accommodating subject of my September article in TNC called 'The new old school.' After touring his Grand Central Academy and Water Street Atelier, I caught up with Jacob Collins through a crackling but engaging telephone interview in mid-August at his summer home on Fire Island. So without further ado, here is one of the most articulate artists out there today, in his own works. My special thanks to Emily for transcribing this for armavirumque--and an extra special thanks to the well-wishers who have written me during my hiatus.

James Panero: What do you call your style of painting?

Collins: I would say Traditional Realist. That refers to the period that begins in the end of the Renaissance and goes to the end of the academic period. Or maybe Classical Realist, which is an interesting label that was coined about thirty-five years ago. It's a useful word because it's a paradox historically. The classicists and the realists were very opposed to one another 150 years ago. But the two of them could have constituted the heart of the dialectical mode in traditional painting, especially in pre-modern painting. So I think Classical Realist works. In fact, the Classical Tradition may be as good as a label as any.

JP: In part you are following in the tradition of the French academy.

C: Absolutely. The influence is very strong. I have a lot of respect for French academic painting. One of the arguments that I make is even if 19th century French painting is not a perfect example of Classical painting, it is at least the most recent case of it; it's where Classical painting was before the great tradition began to fall apart. It's something we can connect to most easily because it's not very far away temporally; it's only a teacher's teacher's teacher, and then we're right back into the nineteenth century. So the message of French art and the ideas underlying their message are part of the cultural memory.

JP: And at the same time, you're not a history painter. You're empirical, in the model of Thomas Eakins.

C: That American tradition is a very strong influence on me. Eakins, the Hudson river painters; then the American painters who came after this: the Luminist painters, and the Tonalists—these art forms are both empirical and aesthetic and

not narrative at all. I think there is something very American about that.

JP: Do you see what you're doing then as more American, or rather, as following in the French model. How do you position your art in terms of national style?

C: Well for one thing, it's a very American phenomenon. There are schools of traditional painting in Europe, but Americans are running most of them. I think this has to do with the fact that after the war, New York City took over the world as the center of art. Maybe in some ways, the Americans feel confident, or are less worried about falling behind in the art scene; maybe the Europeans are still trying to catch up. Personally, I think its time to move forward, and I don't see post-war modernism and post-modernism as moving forward. I'm very happy to move on.

JP: How does your art relate to the tradition of modernism: specifically, what you saw growing up in New York? Does your art relate at all to postmodernism?

C: On some levels, I'm sympathetic with parts of the modern program, especially when you compare it to postmodernism. I'm very fond of the modernists' idea of the art object as a powerful thing: that art is transformative to both the artist and the viewer, that art experiences could cause emotion. One of the negative things about postmodernism is that it's just smart-ass, and that's not something I'm interested in. It's not overtly, or purely political, but it makes a smart political stance that's not about the intrinsic quality of the art.

I think that's one of the ways in which you can trace the history of postmodernism—that is to say, in terms of the sacrifices it made in the quality of the art work. I believe in a traditionalist approach to art. Even the modernists valued the art object in itself. One of the misfortunes with postmodernism is a loss of qualitative value.

So I grew up with those influences and with the idea of art being magical, or artists having some mysterious talents. I love that idea—belief in the art object, in itself—the aesthetic of the thing—even after so much was desecrated and people stopped caring about the art object. And certainly in the 1950s the New York artists cherished the idea of the art object, which was the influence of an earlier period.

JP: Realism has come to be associated, in the modernist view at least, with kitsch, or low art illustration. It's not tough minded. Have you encountered such reaction to your work?

C: I encountered that, though I had some very wonderful instructors who would have called themselves modernists. One of the things I noticed when I was an art student was that a lot of artists or young art students were made to feel very culturally insecure—even in a socially or socio-economically way. In light of this, they tried to pursue a kind of art, like modernism, that seemed to push forward.

Traditional art was, essentially, the art of provincials or hicks, not intellectual or significant. I heard a lot of that and I had trouble with it, but it didn't effect me very much. I guess I was confident that I was trying to become an traditional artist, despite the mainstream view of traditional art. And also, I didn't feel like I was anybody's intellectual inferior because of the fact that I wanted to draw and paint classical art.

JP: How did your history studies at Columbia university relate to your aesthetic development?

C: I was already committed from an early age, 14 or 15, to doing exactly what I've always been doing: art. But when I went to Columbia, I didn't know about other people who were interested in traditional art like me. Later on, I found a lot of

wonderful people who were. When I considered going to an art school for college, I didn't really know, but my assumption was that they would be running either a modernist program, or an illustration program; something in me didn't really want to do either of those.

So I studied history, but I wasn't a deeply committed historian.

JP: You found your direction before your college years.

C: Right, though college probably influenced more than I'd like to admit. But I wanted to do art and I had already done a couple of things that got me very excited about doing art—some art programs in my summers off from college. I also took time off in the middle of college to go to Europe.

JP: At what age did you start to paint in the manner that you paint now?

C: It was basically what I was trying to do in high school. I wasn't good at it, but I was trying to do it. I spent an awful lot of time copying. I copied, as a kid in my room, artists like Michelangelo, and others. I gradually got better, and I had teachers when I was young who were good, so I received good direction. It was right after college, in the very late 1980s, that I started to meet up with other artists. That's when I started to discover that they, too, were doing this kind of art that related to the traditional art forms.

JP: Why is the nude so central in your form of Classical art?

C: I think the nude is central because it is at the core of the Classical tradition. In this regard, the Humanist tradition and the Classical tradition go together. When you go to 5th century Greece, you see the beginning of Classical Humanism. The human figure in the aesthetic center. That's the crucible of it all, and even the architects I know will say that the architecture back then is Humanist Classicism. The Renaissance was the original return to the Classical Tradition. The renaissance artists focused on the human figure—and since there is now a return to Classical Humanism, the nude is naturally central.

One of the definitions of art is â€˜us representing ourselves,' and in a broader sense that's what's happening in art right now. That's what you know about painting when you look at Egyptian art; they're representing themselves. When you think about Renaissance painting, they're representing their values and their proportions, from the way they dress, to the way they hold their head, to the way they look with their eyes; it's who they are, it's who they wish they were. And as we are now engaged in another form of this tradition, we try to find something in the art, maybe some kind of picture of ourselves.

JP: Is there something about our culture today that would necessitate your kind of investigation?

C: I'm not sure that I have a coherent philosophy that could address that question. But it seems that, in the twentieth century, a lot of energy went into dismantling traditional art forms. I don't particularly love that. Whether it was good or bad, this spirit has definitely wound down. So much of the energy of Modernism came from the electricity of breaking the pieces of the art object apart. I'm certainly not claiming that there are no pieces, but that now, in Traditionalism, it's about putting the pieces back together.

JP: Are you part of a movement?

C: I would say yes, When I was a kid, I felt like I was isolated in my pursuit of traditional art forms; and this despite the fact that I am a social person and I do love the idea of sharing and doing things together. There's a certain amount of regret that I experienced when I was launching into a career where I was pretty isolated: I was doing Traditional art in the 1980s, not postmodern art with references to the past. I really wanted to make a claim, and gradually, one by one, I found other people who were interested in the same thing—in the beginning I was quite amazed and excited to find another person who also wanted to draw a figure with a coherent structure, or to learn how to put together a painting with paint and glaze. It was all a total mystery when I started. Little by little, I started randomly bumping into other people, and there was no planning in it at all—especially when I began teaching, I started finding people in very mysterious ways: people popped up and showed up at the door. I was very inspired. I found that I was meeting a whole lot of people who had the same strong desire for Traditionalism as me.

JP: Why did you found two new schools of art? Why teach and paint; why not just paint?

When I was a kid, I looked at art and I recognized that all of the artists that were really great came out of dense little worlds of artists. They all evolved in and thrived in communities where there were piles and piles of artists who often all lived within blocks of each other. And this is true for the Spanish school, for those in Rome, in Paris, in Amsterdam, and in the New York of 1880s. I realized that all the artists I really loved were friends with other people who were important in the art world. I recognized that I wasn't going to be who I really wanted to be without help—and I was really ambitious, I wanted to be a great artist. I just looked at it historically and empirically and realized it wasn't going to happen all by myself. Nobody gets it all by themselves. That inspired me to a great extent to start building the community that I wished I had been born into. I knew I needed to be among like-minded peers; to share and compete, to take turns raising the bar. I came across some artists with similar goals, but I didn't find that energy we associate with the historical schools. So I started teaching and trying to build a scene. I felt like I was young enough, I was in my 20s, to be a student in my school as well as the teacher. If I was going to inherit the place in the art scene that I wanted, I should be starting at it myself by teaching. It's not just like I have been teaching other people, these really gifted artists have taught me as much as I have given them.

Right now, there are people in my studio who are really gifted and hard working and are trying to be better than me. I don't want to be left behind by this truck; I keep on getting pushed along by it. In the other schools of this larger world, I see how it happens from the outside. A lot of people have the insight to develop skills and techniques—they're all drafting off of each other.

JP: How has the public reception been for Realist art?

C: It's very interesting, I didn't expect there to be very much public reception to it, and gradually all the little pieces are starting to come together; more artists keep showing up, training each other, inspiring each other to get better; more galleries start catching on and wanting to be involved; more collectors start to be curious about it, and the more collectors there are, the more respect the artists get.

For quite a while when I was starting out, most of the market in New York was for Modern art. The market for Classically oriented Realism was out of town—and it was mostly in galleries out in California and around the middle of the country. In New York, there seemed to be an anti-Traditionalism with respect to art. Part of Modernism, from the beginning, has been anti-traditionalist; in fact one of its defining factors. Because New York was historically coming out of a commitment to modernism, it was hard for New York galleries to come around and embrace really traditional art. But now it's changing, it's changing fast. The galleries are really

recognizing the passions of the artists and the interests of the collectors.

JP: What are some of the gallery names where we might be able to see this art?

C: One of the galleries is a gallery I'm with: Hirschl and Adler. It's exciting that they've made a commitment in the last 5 or 10 years to get behind this kind of art, which is important because they're a blue-chip gallery.

The John Pence Gallery shows this kind of art, you see it at Forum Gallery, Eleanor Ettinger, Arcadia, and Spanierman. More and more galleries of all different types are showing and selling the artists that have been moving in this direction.

There's a lot of Realism at the Chelsea galleries too, but most of it verges on Post-Modernism because the art seems be to kidding; it does not have the desire to be serious. Its not making a go at the Classical tradition.

JP: So if you were to make a sales pitch for your new school, would you tell artists that you could be a success by pursuing traditional art?

C: I've been interviewing students for years. The one thing that I tell them is that it's crazy. They're often very capable and talented people who could do all kinds of other things, and they would be guaranteed success, and would be able to make mortgage payments and raise a family, so they should probably not do traditional art. But if they are going to do it—and this is not one hundred percent true, but it's mostly true—the people who get really good at it, do well and sell their work. It's not some sort of art world crapshoot where you have to have an angle and know the right people, though there is some of that. There are people who get spectacularly good at painting too; these are the people who are subtle and aesthetic and somehow manage to speak in their own voice. Traditional art has worked, and so far it's been working, and it may be that fashion dumps us off to die, but there's a growing response for the works to get better. It feels like Traditional Realism is a little more on solid ground these days.