Faculty of Art

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A compromised light: Some thoughts on the self-portraits of Pierre Dorion

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Some thoughts on the self-portraits of Pierre Dorion by Andy Patto

There is something haunting about the self-portraits Pierre Dorion has produced over the past fiv years – these images of the artist on a bluish or brownish ground, meticulously turned out in his suit as though painting were a formal occasion. Sometimes I think they are a strangely public for of privacy, where whatever is disclosed serves only to seal off something else. That is part of wha haunts me – that they remain partially opaque. Maybe this is why I don't feel apologetic in saying that I don't entirely understand these works. In an era determined to see everything a a text, these paintings remind us how thoroughly silent paintings can be. Resistant to words they're more like silence than language.

In all these paintings the figure of the artist appears. I call them self-portraits but this is not the self-portrait as it used to be. Not like Rembrandt, who sums up that genre for me, a whole set of humanist possibilities crystallized in the focusing of light on his own face. The light draws attention to his face, illuminating him in the brown darkness. His face is the point from which light floods out, as though it were a lamp. The painting is like a mirror in which phenomenal appearances congeal into a permanence of oil paint. The artist regards himself and, in the careful study of appearances, sees his own soul. Yet "the soul does not exist" writes the poet Kim Maltman. "There is nothing to diminish pain,/or pleasure, /or to give it permanence." And in Dorion's work a painting is no longer a mirror. The artist appears in views that could only have been recorded by someone else. Painting seems to be a process by which the artist is separated from his own image, as though he were seeing himself more as an object than a subject, as though the painting took place across a distance. What becomes visible is not his soul pouring out of his face like light but simply his appearance, seen from a point of view that he could never have.

In these self-portraits the artist either can no longer accomplish that kind of intimate self-disclosure or is no longer able to want it. And though it would seem that every self-portrait must emerge from some sort of narcissism, what appears here seems strangely objective. As though you could be yourself and still see yourself from outside as the object each of us must be to others who pass us in the street. As though the only certain knowledge now lay outside, in a position we can never take. No special knowledge of self is revealed and that earlier, apparently secure self-revealing is replaced by an attenuated longing for it, a nostalgia for what was possible.

Perhaps we're not even individuals anymore in the way Rembrandt seems to have experienced himself. (While I sit at the keyboard and write, my mind keeps drifting towards Peter Handke and the strange, unfulfilling way he has with his characters. In some books the protagonist is the author himself; in others, it is a character. My friend, the poet Roo Borson, and I argue about these characters off and on, always returning to them, and never seem through with the discussion even though we never really have anything new to say. She prefers his writing when Handke is the protagonist because she thinks his fictional characters are thin and unconvincing. But I'm drawn to the geologist Sorger, even though he's Handke in a disguise so thin it really consists only of a different name and a different profession. I find his unconvincingness poignant, tenuous and frail. I think that in saying this I'm also telling you something about Dorion's self-portraits, which are not quite self-portraits.)

When we were out walking one night last spring, not far from his studio, Dorion told me that he thought his paintings were "evacuated." Having been given that word, it's easy to see its resonance everywhere. It's there in the apparent emptiness of the space that always surrounds his figure, in the empty frame that appears in an untitled painting from 1991, in the wreath in *Treasure* and in the vacant glow of light that appears in both *Reliquaire* and *Transept*. But what exactly is it that has been evacuated from these paintings? The paintings have turned away from all the possibilities that were once self-portraiture.

Page 41 & left: Pierre Dorion, *Reliquaire* (1994), front and rear views, oil on canvas & laquered wood, 241 x 176.5 x 76 cm, photo by Louis Lussier

Dorion is one of the most articulate artists I have met – extremely knowledgeable about the art of other periods and in love with all the possibilities they offer. Yet nothing in his own work hints at the colours of the newly cleaned Brancacci Chapel, which he was so excited to have seen. His works are stripped down to one figure – to one colour that has been laboured over, sanded, reworked, adjusted and retouched – to one object that seems to have lost its context. The past is nearby but it is gone. "Except for us, the total past felt nothing when destroyed," wrote Wallace Stevens. What Dorion paints is what someone felt as the past passed away.

This evacuation of painting, then, could be an elegy for those possibilities that can't even be wanted now. Painting is a vision that's diminishing – an eye clouding over with cataracts, losing its capacity to see, or so it seems in the confrontation with the new technologies of vision. The possibilities offered by the art-historical past can't be taken up, since painting must exist in this time, a time when the technical possibilities are different, when the role and status of painting have changed, when we no longer see or feel ourselves in the same way. Painting must contend with its own diminishment and the darkening of the past.

Every image of Dorion is, in one way or another, turned away from us. One sits on a chair looking into the blue ground as though at a wall. Another twists in a sort of *contraposto*, as though avoiding someone about to brush against him. None of the figures explicitly addresses the viewer; none make eye contact. Instead, every figure is turned inward, away from the world that exists outside the painting. Each painting becomes a space that is both intimate and isolating. (*In Double Autoportraits aux Grilles* three metal grills are attached to the surface of the canvas, explicitly barring us from the painting.) Perhaps what's important is just this lack of address: if the painter (not the painting) is communicating with anyone, it is with himself or with what is invisible.

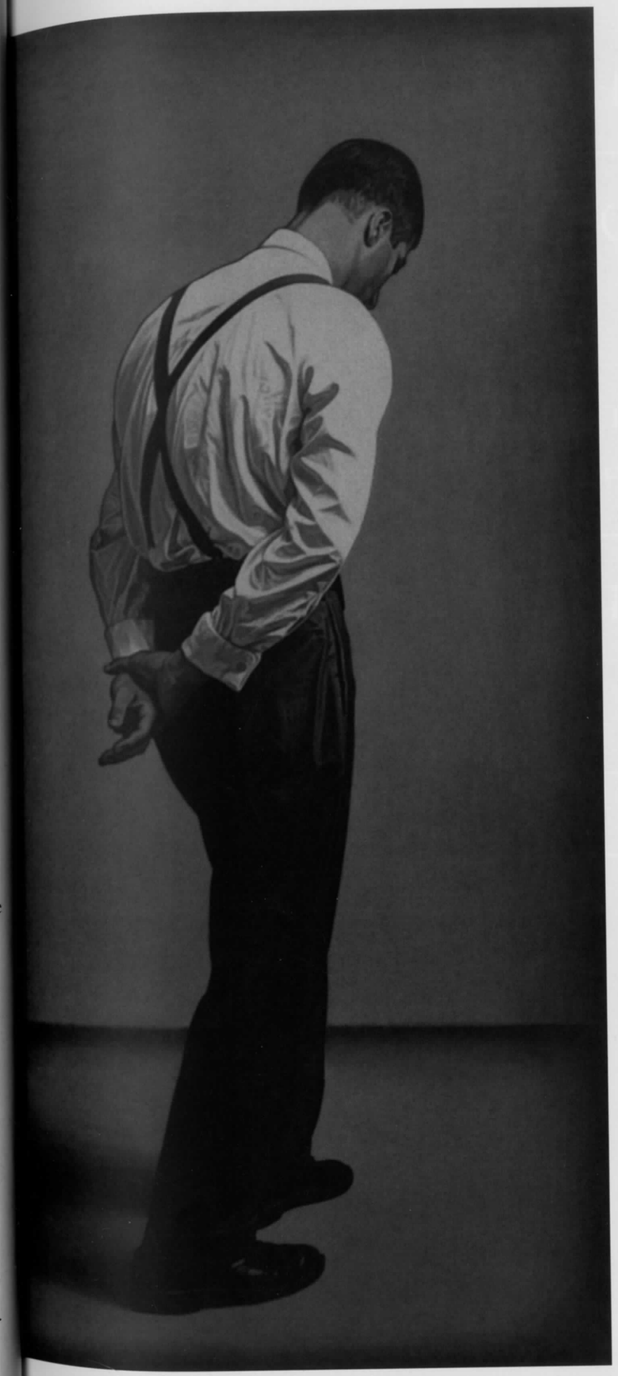
But if the paintings are emptied of any depicted social world, the figures often look as though they are in the service of something. There's an untitled diptych, for example, where Dorion's figure seems to be turning toward someone invisible to us, ready perhaps to carry the tall vertical bar that runs almost from top to bottom of the painting before blurring away. *Double Self-Portrait with Oculus*, with its two self-images, calls to my mind traditional images of the painter at work but now doubled and with all context evaporated. No stretcher or painting is visible, no depiction of the studio and its tools. The only prop is a ruler, a strange replacement for the painter's brush, held by the figure on the right side. And what of the figure on the left? – that gesture, the hand lifting with index figure raised, as though about to address someone or something, to measure or articulate what we can't see. Finally, the only thing that addresses us is a circular black wood frame placed in the centre of the middle panel.

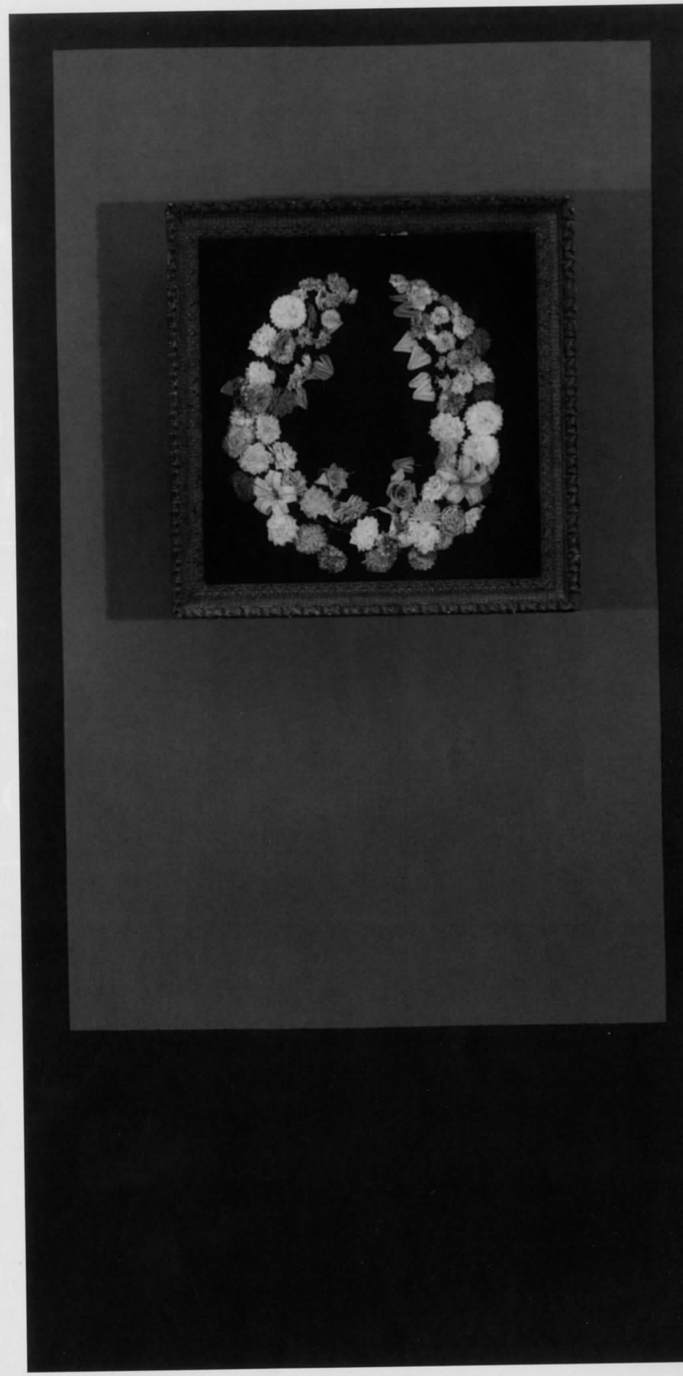
Sometimes I wonder whether Dorion's self-portraits aren't some strange, late off-shoot of Italian metaphysical painting. For if the figure of the artist addresses himself to anyone or anything, it is to that which is invisible and can never make an appearance in the painting. I see his figure as the servant of an exact measure and the paintings saturated by the sensation of an ethic – an ethic submerged in every activity by which the painting is constructed. And what exactly is that ethic? I don't know – and perhaps it's not even something that can be put into words. Perhaps it can only be glimpsed in the subordination of the artist's image to an empty black frame, to rectangles of blue floating like the ghosts of modernist paintings. It is never made clear and perhaps is not known even to the artist. "The order in which we loiterers move about, crazy as it is, seems to our way of thinking the only one in which divinity reveals its attributes, is recognized and savored, in the context of a task we don't understand" wrote Eugenio Montale in "Visit to Fadin."

If the paintings are evacuated, what they are most emptied of is a whole dimension whose existence now seems impossible – I would call it the religious or the spiritual if the mere use of those words didn't seem to destroy the thing named. Perhaps it would be better to say only that the paintings are elegies and that what is mourned is all that is invisible – anything beyond the mere matter of this existence.

I have always liked the way Dorion uses colour because it's the exact opposite of what I have tried to do. I wanted to reach an absolute purity of colour; his colours are always mixed and subdued. I wanted a colour so disembodied that it would hover in the air in front of the painted wall; he always brings colour down to the surface of the canvas on which it lies.

I first saw the self-portraits in a studio on Via Marmorata during a period when Dorion was living in Rome. Against a background of blond-plywood-covered walls and the roar of traffic, they cast their quiet ethical light,





Right: Pierre Dorion, *Treasure* (diptych, 1994), Oil & object on canvas, 213 x 215.5 x 20 cm, photo by Pierre Charrier