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From Anger to Vulgarity: How Some New Art Updates Old Issues

Charles Reeve

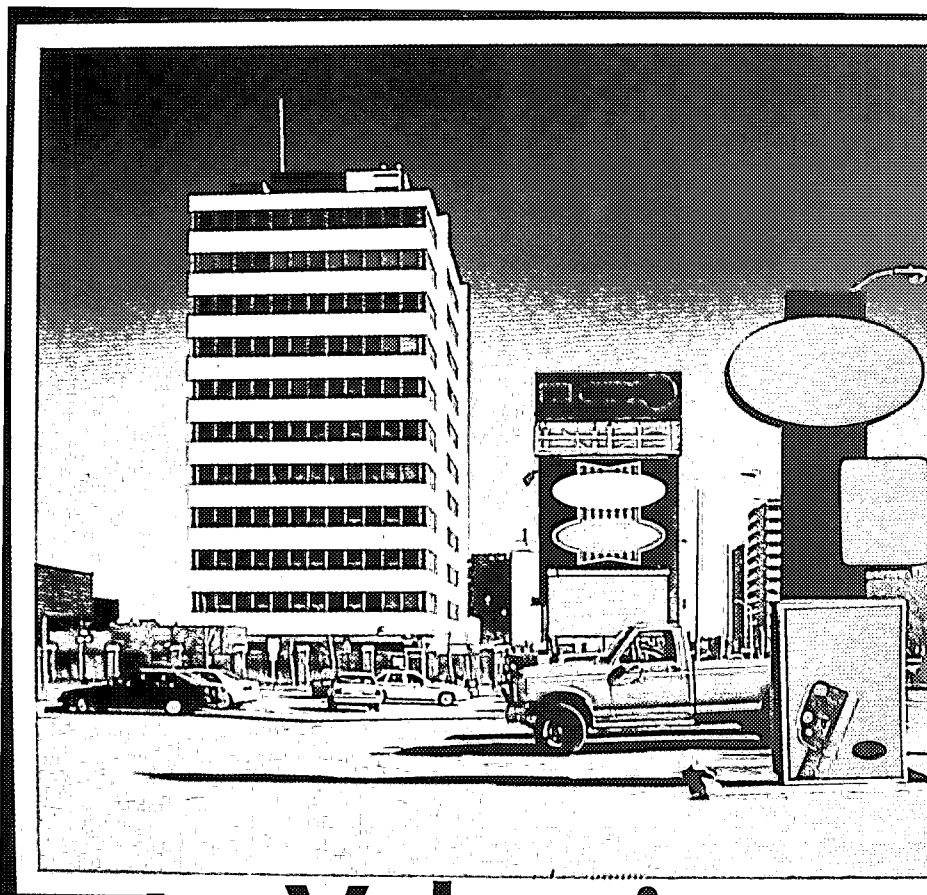
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From Anger to Vulgarity

How some new art updates old issues

Anger makes things clear. It separates good from bad with a certainty that no other emotion can match. Perhaps this potential for clarity explains why deeply felt ethical issues informed much of the most influential art of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s—such as the attacks by Adrian Piper, Leon Golub and Hans Haacke on the art world's awkward relationship to governmental and corporate forms of prejudice and violence.¹

Undoubtedly, this art raised, and continues to raise, important questions about how museums and galleries polish the images of politicians and corporations. However, its intransigence also enables its opponents to dismiss it as shrill or ideologically blinkered. As a result, the eminent art historian T.J. Clark, in his book *Farewell to an Idea*, wonders if anger might be less useful than what he calls “vulgarity”—the difference being that anger sets itself apart from its opponents, while vulgarity hangs around to emit timely eruptions when polite conversations turn vacuous. At its best, Clark writes, vulgarity “seems always to be blurting out a dirty secret which the rest of the decor is conspiring to keep.”² One such “dirty secret” is that the language of commerce, by invading every aspect of our lives, may have stifled all other forms of communication.

Try to remember, for example, the last time nothing in your view had print on it telling you who made it or where you bought it. Even in your bedroom, you're not safe. Can you turn off your alarm clock without being reminded of its brand? Or does the name of some electronics giant greet you each morning? And outside our cocoons, advertising inundates us,

| BY CHARLES REEVE

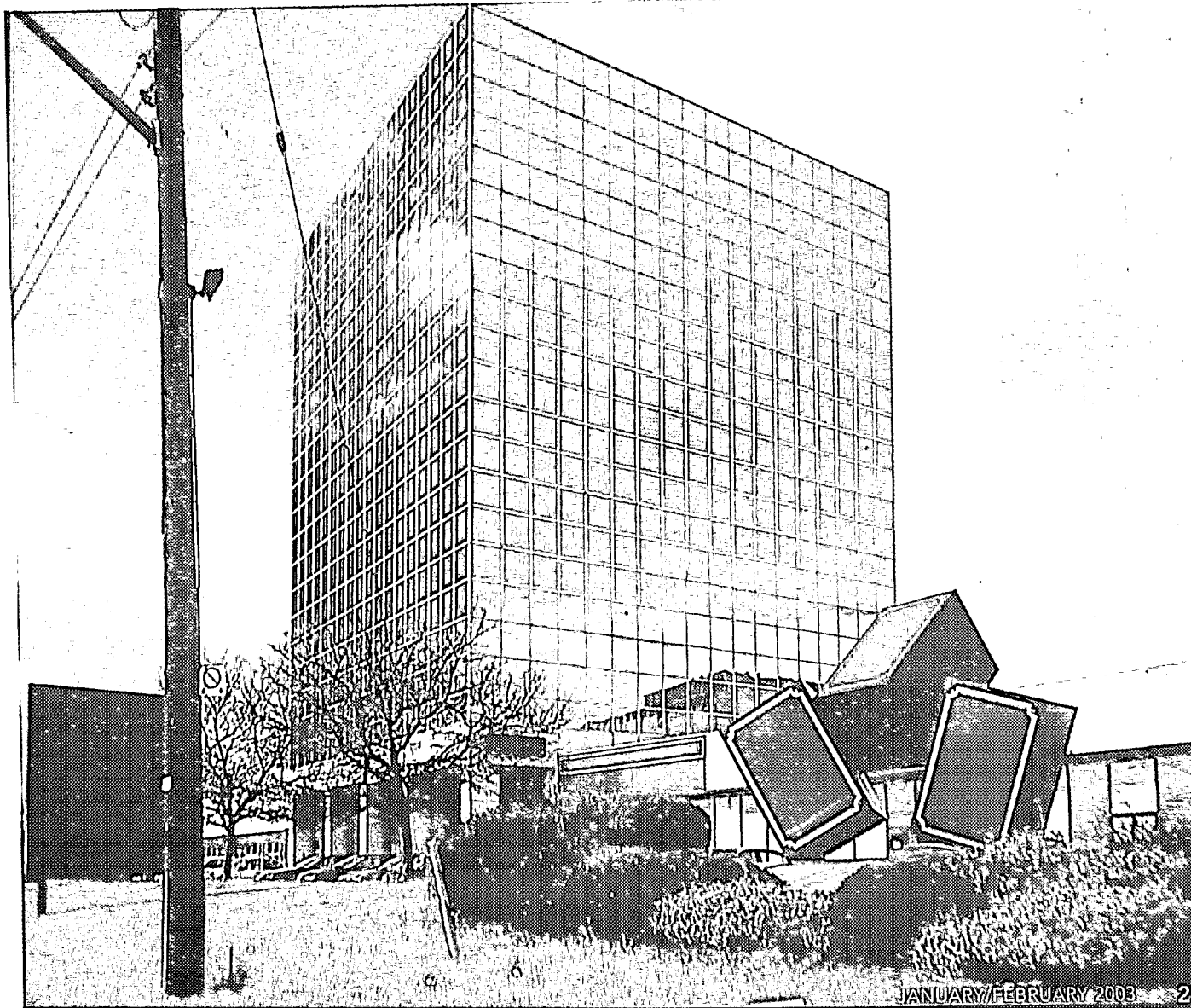
Left: Robin Collyer, *Yonge Street, Willowdale, 1995*, retouched photograph, 20 by 24 inches
Below: Robin Collyer, *Sculpture, 2001*, retouched photograph, 20 by 24 inches (photos courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto).



prompting a growing number of artists to produce what we might call “vulgar” engagements with the pervasiveness of advertising: finding ways to interrupt the flow of commercial signs and symbols, to bring them back into view so that we can ponder their roles in our lives and, more particularly, in the art world.

One example of this practice is Robin Collyer’s photographs of the realms between suburbs and urban core, which Collyer makes subtly disorienting by removing all of the words from their usual habitats—billboards, corporate logos, clothing labels and so on—thus creating a gap between what we see and what we expect to see. “In our present Western context, the only way we see all the urban inscription is by taking it away,” the designer Bruce Mau writes of these pictures. “Only then do we realize the degree to which our attention is colonized.”³ Even if advertising isn’t inherently bad, its ubiquity might make it so—just as the omnipresence of any form of communication might lower the horizons of our imaginations.

Collyer responds to this possibility by using the techniques of commercial photography against the master those techniques were meant to serve, retouching his photographs to remove what he calls the “blemish” of advertising. Of course, as he notes in a statement about these pictures, the landscape improves only margin-



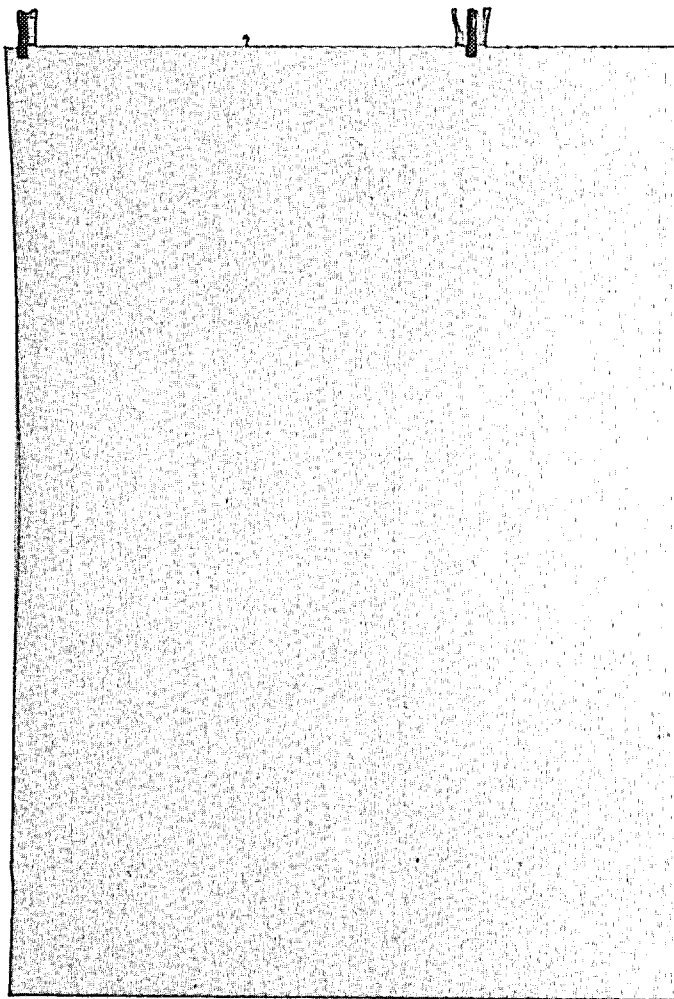
ally—the office buildings, store fronts and billboards remain, and we have difficulty imagining their surfaces filled with anything other than more logos and brand names.⁴ But at least we now realize how thoroughly we've internalized that expectation.

These issues may seem distant from the art world, but pictures like *Yonge Street, Willowdale* (1995) and *Sculpture* (2001) show that the languages of art and commerce intermingle tightly. The museum's free brochures, building entrances and rooms all have somebody's logo somewhere—subtly placed, perhaps, but there nonetheless.

However, the languages of art and commerce connect more directly than merely sharing the same space, as a closer inspection of Collyer's photographs demonstrates. By removing the text from the backlit Plexiglas cubes in *Yonge Street, Willowdale*, for example, Collyer reveals the marked similarity of shape, color and materials between these advertising structures and the minimalist sculpture of the late 1960s. One can easily imagine some of these structures in an exhibit of work by Donald Judd. However, this relationship reaches its highest point in *Sculpture*, where the languages of art and commerce merge. In the right mid-ground stand three large, tilted rectangles, each painted blue with a white border. With the text removed, they look like the generic corporate sculpture that guards the entrances to office buildings everywhere—which they are. But there's a twist. When Collyer shot the source photograph for *Sculpture*, the offices of a major corporation occupied the building in the background. However, the sculpture dated from the building's previous tenants, who left it behind when they moved. The new occupants turned the blue sculpture into a billboard by adding their logoform and a white border. Collyer's retouching removed the logoform but left the white border, thus returning the sculpture to an in-between state that points to its appropriateness as either billboard or artwork.

This liminal state between art and commerce characterized much prominent art of the late 1960s, like Frank Stella's shaped canvases and Donald Judd's Plexiglas boxes. Nonetheless, those pristine, finely fabricated objects influenced the art world of the 1960s and 1970s tremendously, which is part of Collyer's point: Judd and Stella wanted to produce pure art, but the harder they tried to escape the everyday world of commerce and mass production, the more closely their choice of shapes, colors and materials tied them to that world. Stella and, especially, Judd argued that their work spoke to universal aesthetic values, but the plywood, copper paint and Plexiglas from which they constructed their "timeless" objects were decidedly of the moment, and look it today.

Collyer attended art school during the late 1960s, as the minimalism and hard-edge abstraction of the preceding generation swept through the North American art world.⁵ Thus, his efforts to search out the codes and conventions that this art's surfaces hide or deny fits into the breaks with the past that Clark argues characterizes the vulgarity of modern art: "Not being able to make a previous moment of high achievement part of the past—not to lose it and mourn it and, if necessary, revile it—is, for art in modernist circumstances, more or less synonymous with not being able to make art at all."⁶ For Clark, a key aspect of the modern-ness of modern artists is the



Su-en Wong, *Summerlime*, 1999, colored pencil and acrylic on panel, 45 by 65 inches (photo courtesy Savage Gallery).

assurance with which they tell the giants on whose shoulders they stand, "You're history."

By dismissing their predecessors, however, artists also incur a debt. "Every modernism has to have its own proximate Black Square," Clark writes, referring to Kasimir Malevich's efforts in the early twentieth century to reach painting's basic conditions by laying a thick, black square on a white background, and to how Malevich's "suprematism" opened the door for much of the twentieth century's most influential art.⁷ But modernism, as a protracted tendency, program or compulsion to make new art by asking what art is, also cast its shadow far into the future—particularly in its late forms as minimalism and hard-edge abstraction, which, more than thirty years after their highest moments, continue to provoke ambivalent artistic reactions.

In other words, perhaps one of the modernisms to which Clark refers is post-modernism, as exemplified not only in Collyer's photographs, but also in the monochrome paintings that Su-en Wong has overlaid with self-portraits during the last four years. Pictures like *Buttercup* and *Summerlime* (both 1999) project memories and fantasies onto the modernist surfaces of the 1960s (and the suprematist surfaces from fifty years earlier). Wong says these pictures investigate "the transition between childhood and adulthood," which the lingering memories of our youth render always incomplete.⁸ This already complex process has an additional layer for Wong, however, since she was



born in Singapore and consequently faces issues of integration not only into the adult world, but also into Western culture.

Her work therefore sits astride several boundaries. In *Buttercup*, the pose, clothing and body type all make the figure's age unclear. She's part child, and she's part woman playing a child to accent coyly her sexuality. Her face and hair strongly reflect her Asian background, but her t-shirt (or pajama top?) suggests an interest in Western popular culture. *Summerlime* plays on similar ambiguities—the Asian girl in the private school uniform with its British imperial legacy. But is it a row of different girls, or a multiple self-portrait? The slightly varied heights suggest the former possibility. However, the changing poses and expressions make it hard to tell whether physiognomy or mood cause the differences between the faces, while the similar body type—particularly the notably muscular legs of the figures—suggest that this picture shows multiple views of the same person. In either case, the image projects this memory or fantasy of nice-but-naughty girls (they're lining up politely, but ignoring the “keep off the grass” sign to do so) while alluding to the stereotypical inability of Caucasians to tell Asians apart. And both pictures project their constellation of ambivalences onto the screen provided by the monochrome, a particularly rarified product of modernism's attempts to catalogue painting's definitive characteristics.

Modernism's investigations focused on painting's internal conditions, believing that art exists in isolation. Hence, modernism's most committed exponents, Stella and Judd among them, literally and figu-

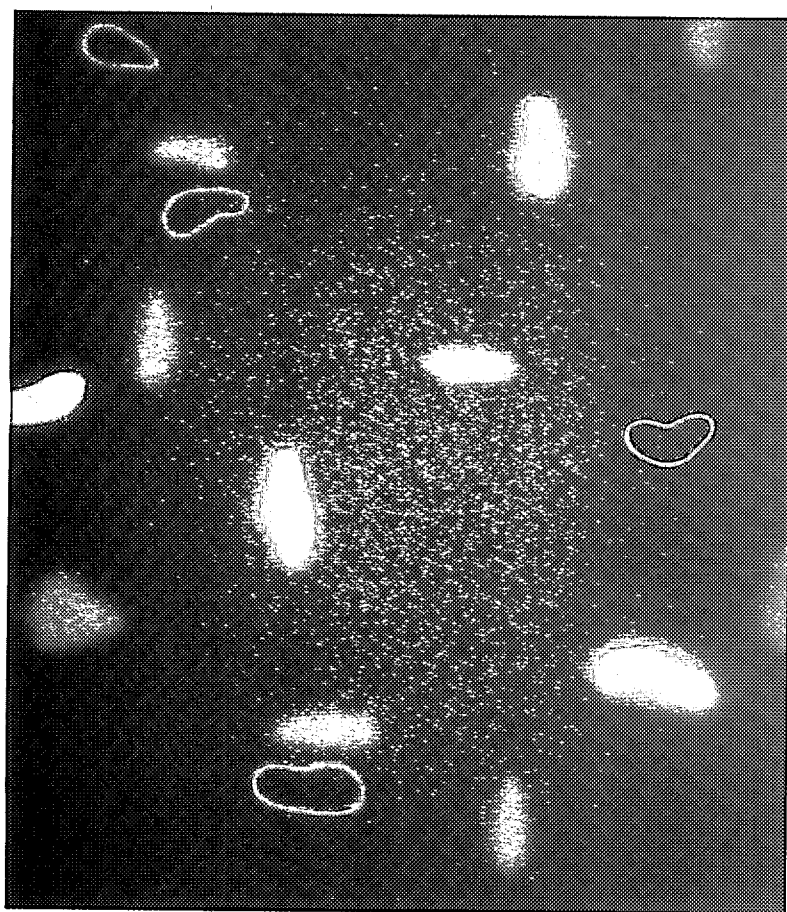
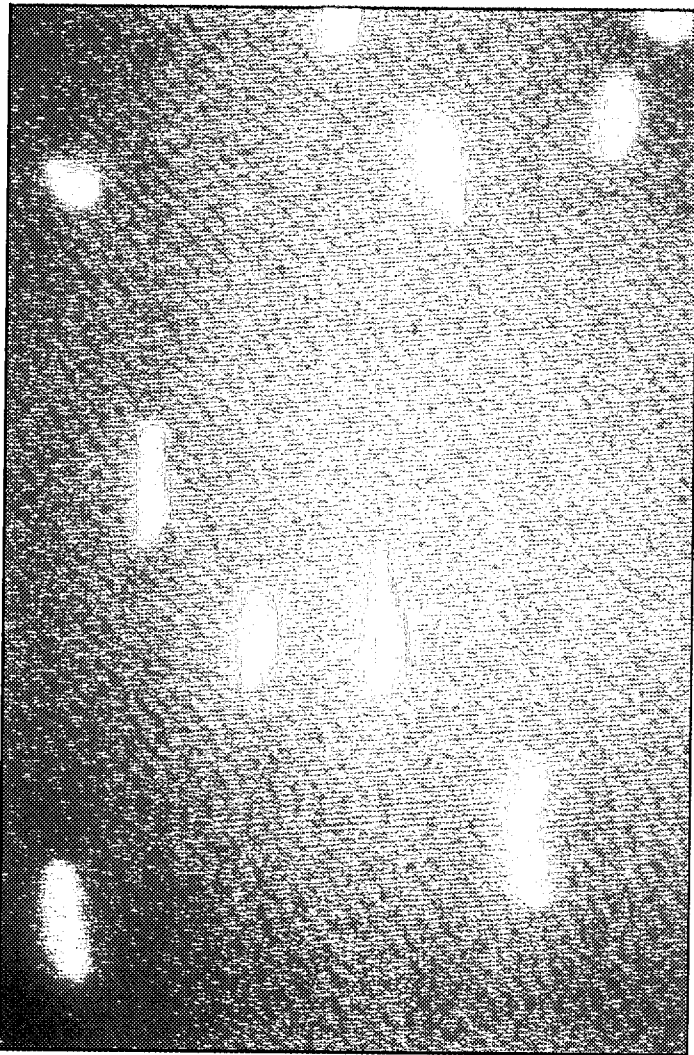
ratively wanted nothing to come between art work and viewer. They intended the experience of viewing their art to be transparent and transcendent. So Wong cheekily interposes herself where she doesn't belong, changing everything by introducing the messiness of personal history. However, she doesn't block the monochrome. Instead, she places herself in a corner of the picture or off to one side, and creates a further ambiguity: is she discreet, shy or intimidated? Perhaps all three—which is to say, maybe her relation to the monochrome is similar to her relation to the Superman t-shirt in *Buttercup* or the school uniform in *Summerlime*. Each case involves a trade-off complicated by the fact that the downside and the payoff are the same. Modernism's excruciating seriousness, for example, was both its virtue and its vice, so rather than dismantling its codes, Wong adds something that skims slightly uneasily across its surface.

By superimposing representation on abstraction, Wong again lingers on a boundary that earlier generations of artists and critics considered inviolable: only in the last few years has the similarity between abstract and representational painting (i.e.: that they are both painting) come to seem more significant than the fact that one depicts identifiable objects and the other does not—a shift no doubt part and parcel of the radical crumbling of boundaries throughout the visual arts. Medium, narrative and verisimilitude now are less important than whether something is “art”—itself an increasingly baggy category.

For this reason, the formal differences between, on the one hand, Collyer's photographs and Wong's self-portraits and, on the other, Michael Gibson's recent abstract paintings, mean far less than their shared interest in scrutinizing the dissolution of boundaries between representation and abstraction, or between the personal and the commercial. However, if Wong and Collyer investigate this development by examining representation's slide into abstraction, Gibson comes at the problem from the other side. Something like Morris Louis' “veil” paintings of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Gibson's smooth enamel-on-wood surfaces present us with fields of dark color that would seem flat, except that clearly delineated shapes appear to float on their surfaces while blurry masses sink into their backgrounds. And herein lies a conundrum: how can nothing have depth or volume?

Obviously, it can't. But these pictures aren't about things, or about nothing. They're about representation's rapid incursion into our everyday lives. The title *Currency Converter* (2001) points not only to the growing fluidity of national currencies (think of the ease of withdrawing money from a North American bank through a European automated teller), but also to the increasing importance of managerial forms of capitalism, which can generate profits by shifting huge amounts of money between countries to capitalize on tiny differences in exchange rates. In both cases, the abstract quality of the transactions brings them closer to our lives, rather than moving them further away.

Similarly, by splitting the word “afterimage” in two for the title of another painting, Gibson gathers multiple levels of ambiguity around the issue of representation. Our optic nerves create the illusion of the afterimage, which we experience when we stare at a bright light and then look away. The title *After Image* identifies Gibson's painting as an illusion, but of a different sort. If images represent things in the real world, then a painting after an image is representation twice removed.



Above: Michael Gibson, *Currency Converter*, 2001, enamel on wood, 55 by 48 inches (photo courtesy Fay Gold Gallery).
 Left: Michael Gibson, *After Image*, 2002, enamel on masonite, 72 by 48 inches (photo courtesy James Graham & Sons/J.G. Contemporary).

However, representation is itself abstraction—even the most faithful photograph translates depth and volume into flatness. So if we're in the realm of the "after image," where are we, exactly? What is abstraction beyond abstraction?

None of the art I've discussed answers these questions because Collyer, Wong and Gibson want to make content collaborate with form, drawing us in with their attractive surfaces before asking us to ponder whether commerce is colonizing art, and our imaginations with it: the goal is to consider the problem rather than solve it. However, the rise of vulgarity signals a shift in priorities rather than an epochal rupture. In fact, although Clark's discussion of vulgarity is relatively recent, the art he had in mind is not. He was trying to contextualize the significance of abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Hans Hofmann, who had their peaks forty and fifty years ago.

The issues haven't changed much over time, though. The abstract expressionists constituted the first generation of American art stars, and the first to face the issue of how, or whether, aesthetics and economics could co-exist. That this question has remained open for so long suggests that, for now, vulgarity works. As Clark remarks, one advantage of the term "vulgarity" is that it's hard to imagine it being recoded into a virtue: "Not to be certain, for once, that the negative term brought on to describe a modernist artifact can ever be made to earn its positive keep—to emerge transfigured by the fact of its having

been attached to a difficult painting or sculpture—may mean we are on to something."⁹ Vulgarity persistently raises awkward issues in polite company, and thus keeps those questions alive. And that's good, because the questioning is the point. Uncertainty keeps our minds and imaginations alive, and our souls and bodies with it. [E]

A show of Su-en Wong's work will be on view at Portland, Oregon's Savage Gallery January 10–February 22, 2003, and will coincide with the publication of a book of her work by Marquand and D.A.P. Work by Robin Collyer will be on view in the "Aluminum" show at the Susan Hobbs Gallery until January 25, 2003.

NOTES: 1. I am grateful to Ron Witherspoon and Shelia Free for inviting me to present an earlier version of this article at their "Projected Images" conference at Georgia State University in October 2002. 2. T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: episode from a history of modernism* (Yale, 1999): 397. 3. Bruce Mau, *Life Style* (Phaidon, 2001): 576. 4. Robin Collyer, artist's statement. 5. Philip Monk, *Robin Collyer: Idioms of Resistance* (Art Gallery of Ontario, 1993): 14. 6. Clark, *Farewell*: 371. 7. Clark, *Farewell*: 373. 8. Su-en Wong, "Artist Statement," www.savagegallery.com. 9. Clark, *Farewell*: 375.

CHARLES REEVE is editor-in-chief at ART PAPERS.

Su-en Wong, Buttercup, (detail), 1999, colored pencil and acrylic on panel, 52 by 48 inches (photo courtesy Savage Gallery).

