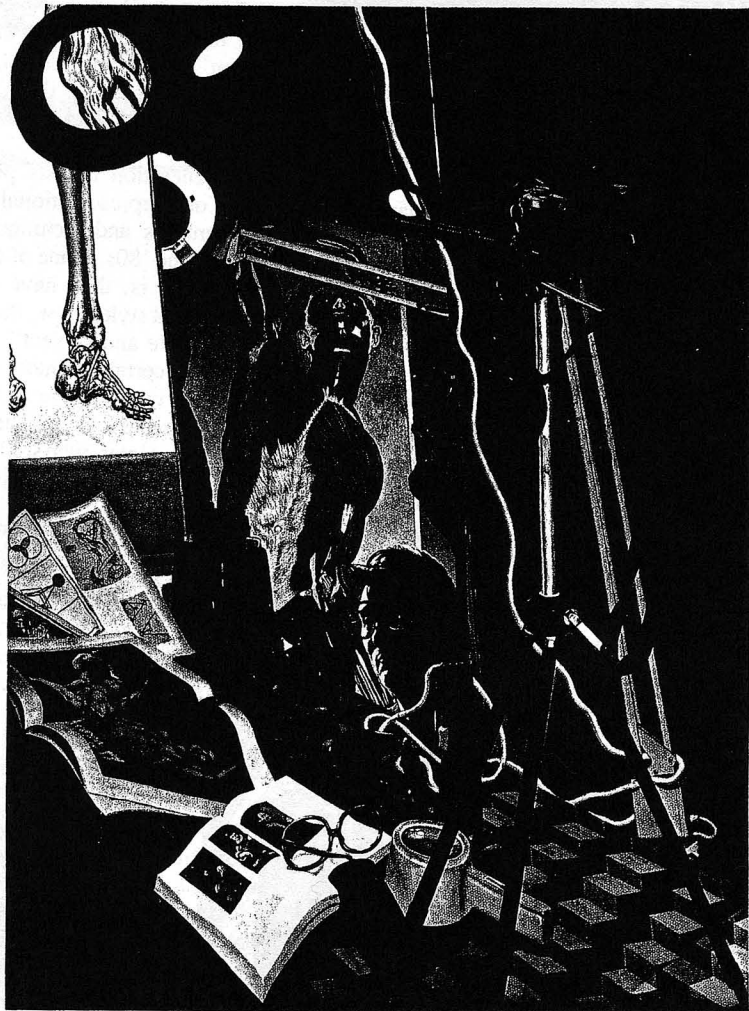


# FACTS OF LIFE



AMERICA HAS always had an impulse toward the real, a passion for the concrete and vernacular that has inspired much of its greatest art. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, artists as diverse as the early American limners, the painters of the Hudson River School, and realist extraordinaire Thomas Eakins transformed local scenes and everyday experience into images of tremendous poetic and moral force. Yet despite this formidable tradition, realism has virtually disappeared from the mainstream of American painting. At a time when a fickle art market has slapped a *neo* on every other historical style, realism alone has proved to be nonrecyclable.

**LEFT** Jack Beal, *The Sense of Sight*, 1986-87, oil on canvas, a symbolic still-life arrangement of objects that relate to the artist's craft and to vision.

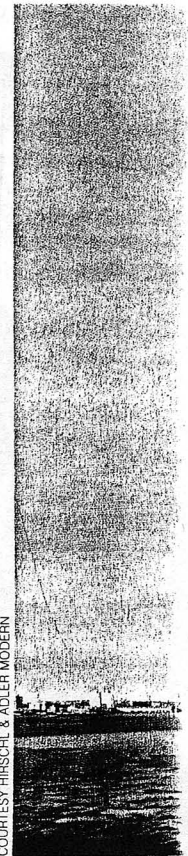
Perhaps the term itself is to blame. No one quite knows what *realism* means or what a *neo* version might look like. In retrospect, 19th-century realism—Gustave Courbet's realism—seems clear-cut. Courbet worked in the dominant naturalist mode but redirected it from Neoclassic and Romantic concerns toward the peasant life near his native town of Ornans. As an antidote to academic formulas for achieving ideal beauty, he advocated drawing directly

from nature. Ever since, unidealized, unsentimental representations of contemporary life have formed the basis for most realism, whether that of Eakins and the Ashcan School or the urban scene painters of the 1930s.

The term became problematic with the advent of modernism in the '40s. As the abstract avant-garde gained critical and popular support, realist programs were shunted to the periphery, now a drag on modernism's jet-propelled thrust into the

*Long eclipsed by a host of more fashionable styles, contemporary American realism continues and evolves. The realist painters have a passion for the concrete—the world as they see it*

BY NANCY GRIMES



future. By the '50s, with Abstract Expressionism in full ascendancy—the very emblem of artistic progress—the definition of realism had degenerated into a catchall term covering all figurative styles. Synonymous with reactionary, academic, and illustrative, realistic was now used by its detractors to describe any nonabstract work.

In the '60s critical discussion of realism became even more difficult when Pop art and Minimalism advanced realist claims. Both movements came with clear-cut avant-garde credentials, while offering the more traditional satisfactions of

a vernacular American subject matter (Pop) and the stubborn physicality of unadorned objects (Minimalism). On the other hand, the images of a handful of naturalist painters who were emerging at the time were dismissed as conservative, even though the sense of the real they offered was in some respects more radical. While Minimalism assumed a uniform response to the physical properties of objects—one that was shared by all viewers—realists such as Jack Beal, Alfred Leslie, and Philip Pearlstein believed that reality was fluid and unstable, historically determined and filtered through individual perception. Beal and Leslie, moreover, dared to adopt a moral stance to their subject matter, unlike their Pop-art counterparts.

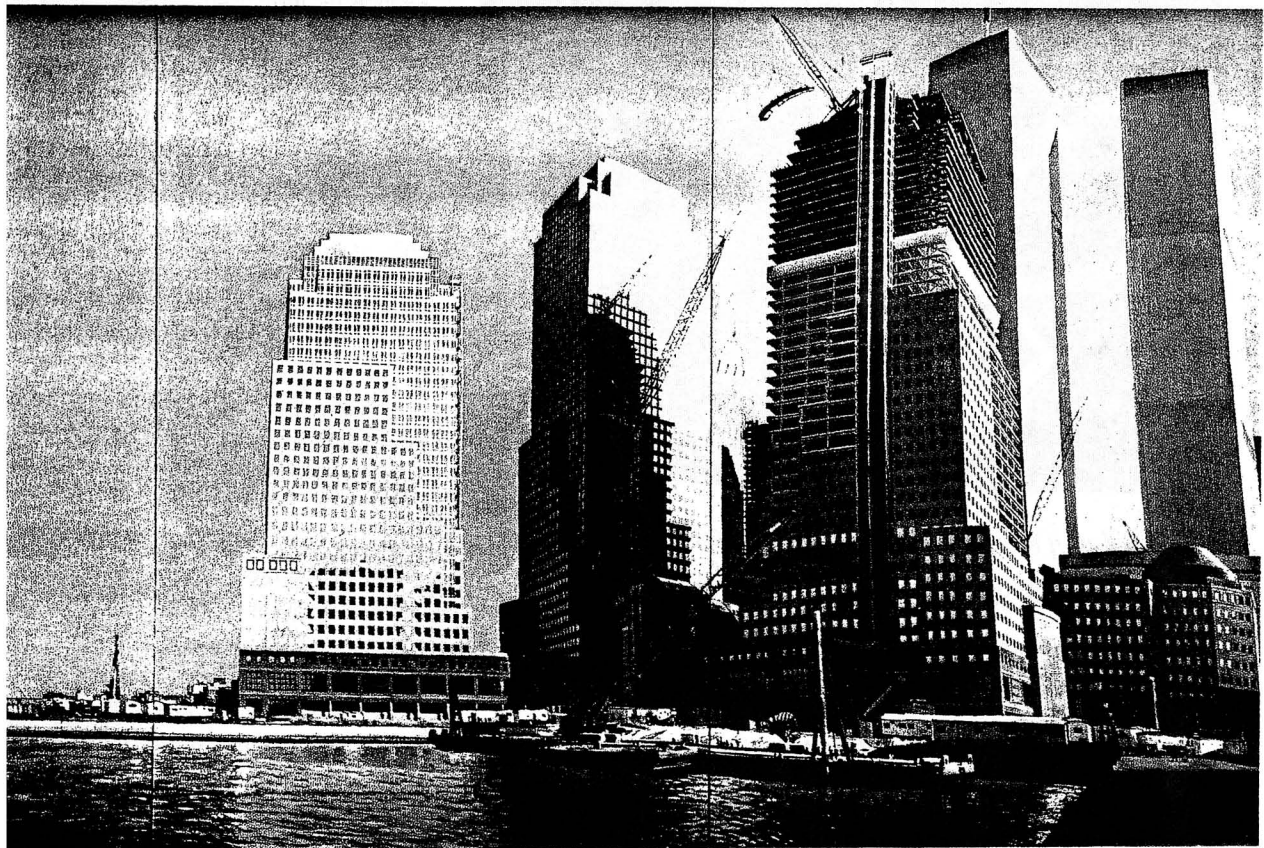


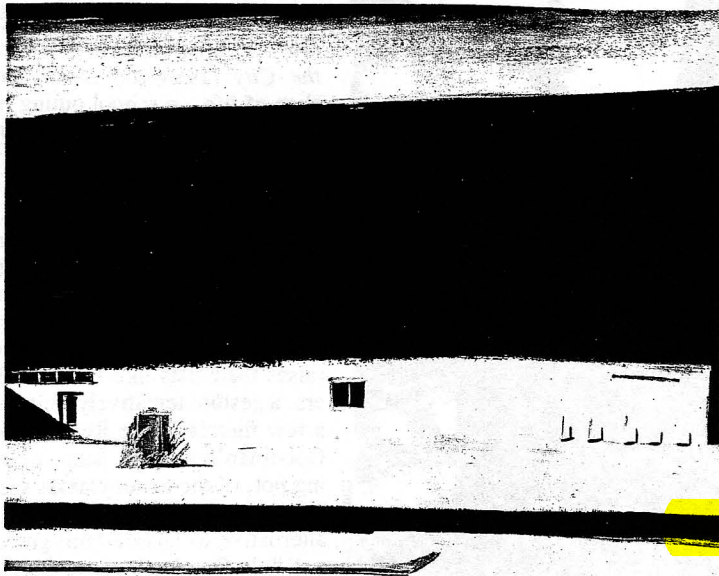
**ABOVE** Veteran realist Jack Beal in his studio in Oneonta, New York. **BELOW** Rackstraw Downes, *World Trade/World Financial*, 1986, oil on canvas: a seemingly objective view of the towers of finance.

The term “realist” was—and is—anathema. Beal, 57, one of the founding fathers of contemporary realism (he has shown at the Alan Frumkin Gallery in New York since 1967) and its most ardent champion, calls himself a “life painter.” He insists that “realism” has “negative connotations,” suggesting “dark paintings about poor and crippled people.” Sidney Goodman, 52, who began exhibiting his maverick brand of allegorical naturalism in the early '60s, calls “realism” “a negative term.” “It’s a conservative thing,” says Goodman, “and I don’t consider myself a conservative painter.”

Even if the first—and second—generation realists preferred the less charged “figurative” or “representational,” many of them have brought conventions and techniques associated with traditional realism into the '80s. None of the artists are traditionalists, however. That is, they have no interest in preserving a particular historical style. How, then, do artists today conceive of a realist style and subject?

Rackstraw Downes, 49, believes that certain painters are drawn to realism “by some fascination with or love of the forms depicted, or by a story that can only be told in a naturalistic language.” The British-born painter, who studied at Cambridge and Yale, started out as a geometric abstraction-





In Richard Sheehan's *Neponset Noon*, 1988, oil on canvas, sweeps and slashes of paint coalesce to produce a glimpse of hot midday light framed by an overpass.

of something and drawing. And for me, 'convincing' implies something different from 'realistic.' It implies a closeness to my own experience."

Observation, says Geiger, allows him to become "less self-conscious about making art decisions," which, in turn, enables "something more mysterious and surprising to come into the work." His studies of the people and places around the University of Virginia, where he teaches, are at once intimate and distanced—the familiar viewed from a vantage of disengagement.

Observation is also crucial for landscapist Richard Sheehan, for it allows him to invest his fragments of suburban sprawl with a sense of immediacy. Sheehan, a 35-year-old Yale graduate, is a Boston-based painter with a national exhibition record. The plein air aspect of his work, he says, "seems like the right way to do it, to go out and paint what I'm looking at. I go to too much trouble to go to the place for it to be casual. If I painted in the studio, I wouldn't paint landscapes; it would seem false or phony to me not to paint what I'm looking at." Sheehan crops the panoramic vistas of traditional landscape into rapidly painted details. Each painting is a perceptual fragment caught on the sly.

COURTESY JEREMY STONE GALLERY

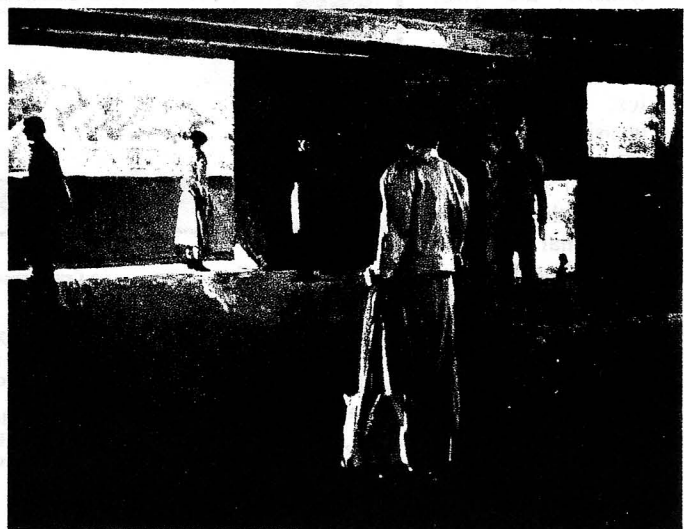
Sheehan, like Geiger, says he needs "to respond to something outside the painting."

ist. Today he shows at Hirsch & Adler Modern in New York, exhibiting cityscapes and landscapes that record, with Olympian detachment, the coexistence of nature and culture. In *World Trade/World Financial* (1986), Downes observes the construction of a skyscraper in lower Manhattan. Pushing against water and sky, the towers of finance stretch upward, cathedral-like.

By using observation Downes avoided painting in an overly conceptualized abstract format. "I originally painted from nature as a challenge to my habits," he says. "I entered each abstract painting with a lot of conceptions about style and what could and could not be done with form. I'd spend the course of the painting looking for ways of moving the different elements in relation to one another until I felt that some kind of meaningful subject was there. But when I started painting from nature, I did exactly the opposite. I looked at something that was already some sort of meaningful subject and then at the canvas and wondered what forms I would have to make in order to put it on the canvas. I found that to be a big challenge to my abilities, and I still do."

The intricate operation of transferring an immediately observed subject onto a two-dimensional surface is a realist technique of particular significance for two emerging artists. Philip Geiger, a former student of Downes, thinks that painting from observation influences the meaning of a work. The 32-year-old graduate of the Yale Art School, who exhibits at New York's Tatistcheff Gallery, says he wants "maximally convincing images, which means sitting down in front

ever, their empiricism does not pretend to lead to knowledge. Rather, it opens up or, conversely, bridges a psychological gap between the self and the world. Each act of vision establishes a dynamic field in which inside and outside mingle. In Geiger's paintings, a sense of mystery arises from the distance that the artist's stance as an observer creates between himself and everyday surroundings. This preoccupation with distance and separation, implicit in most of his work, becomes explicit in *Charlottesville Interior* (1987), a tableau of six still, tense figures distributed across



COURTESY TATISTCHEFF GALLERY

Philip Geiger's *Charlottesville Interior*, 1987, oil on canvas. A gulf, both physical and psychological, separates Geiger's people.

an empty, murkily lit space. Physical as well as psychological, the gulf Geiger establishes between people is profound and perhaps uncrossable.

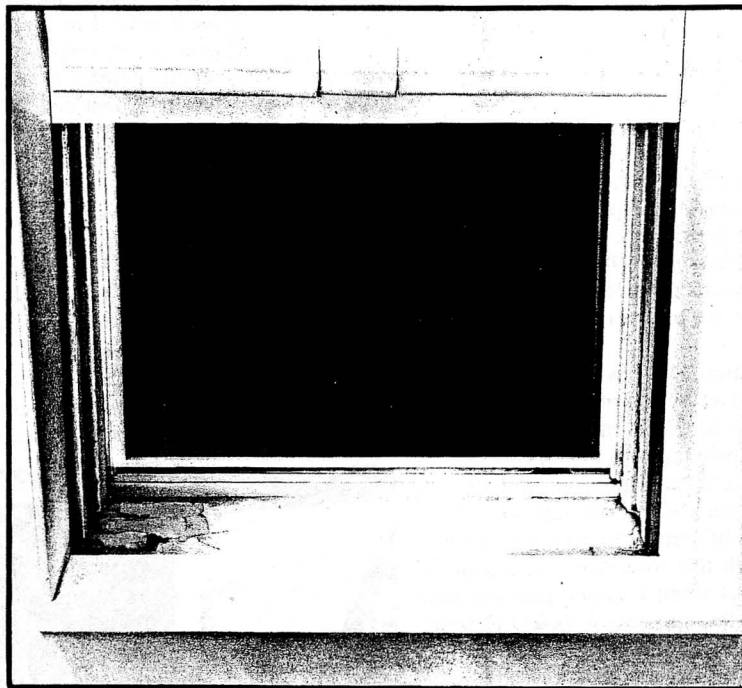
Sheehan, on the other hand, uses observation as a method of capturing or possessing a particular place, if only for an instant. In *Neponset Noon* (1988), for example, the perceiving eye and recording hand seem to work simultaneously. In this painting sweeps and slashes of slippery paint coalesce into a glimpse of hot midday light framed by a massive section of highway overpass. For Sheehan, the authenticity of painting lies in the act of seeing as a temporally and geographically specific event, occurring at *that* time, in *that* place, and originating in the body, in the eyes of the viewer.

For some realists, however, the subject is more important than how it is observed. Jack Beal believes that "nothing is more important than babies and breakfast. Meals are monuments in our lives." Beal heroizes the daily grind, investing it with a significance that formerly was accorded only to major historical events. By invoking the grand themes of past paintings, he transforms himself, his wife, and his friends into mythic figures, their routine tasks into epics, their humble utensils into a hero's arsenal. In *The Sense of Sight* (1986-87), whose title refers to a traditional still-life theme, Beal fuses autobiography and allegory by surrounding himself with objects pertaining to his craft (art reproductions, anatomical studies, a camera) and to vision in its more ordinary form (binoculars, glasses, a flashlight).

Like Beal, Sidney Goodman grounds his art in his everyday life. However, in his work the ordinary becomes extraordinary as he pushes his narrative tableaux toward the visionary or fantastic. Rather than celebrate individual family members, he casts them as characters in bizarre scenarios. "I use the people around me," he says, "for



Catherine Murphy painting outside her home in Poughkeepsie, New York. By rendering the details of her house, Murphy says that she "can speak about who I am as a human being."



In Catherine Murphy's *Screened Window*, 1988, oil on canvas, the black void of night is separated from the viewer by a succession of frames.

something besides the mundane. They're archetypes." His *Day in the City* (1984-85) is a plausible slice of life—a school outing in the park—that addresses American social and political problems. In the foreground a group of children half-heartedly listen to an adult (who looks like Ronald Reagan) pointing to a live pig, apparently the subject of his lecture. In the distance, atop a huge mound of dirt or rubbish, a racially mixed group of onlookers raises their fists like freedom fighters, a gesture tentatively imitated by a few figures in the Reagan group. Goodman's rubbish heap, or melting pot, of the lower classes seethes with purpose and offers youth an alternative to laissez-faire greed.

While Goodman elaborately allegorizes social concerns, Catherine Murphy, 42 (who has shown in New York since 1971), believes that the mere decision to portray home and family is political. By depicting the interior and surrounding views of her home, Murphy says, "I can speak about who I am as a human being. I can say, 'This is my family, this is my house, this is the real world.' There is something politically honest about doing this. It allows me to feel that this history and this viewpoint of mine are both politically viable."

Unlike the more overt moralism of Beal and Goodman, however, Murphy's is implied. Her explicit subject is the experience of space, but it is the claustrophobic space of city and suburb. The black void of night that dominates *Screened Window* (1988) is separated from the viewer by a succession of frames—sill, shade, and screen—suggesting that culture has not conquered nature but merely pushed it away.

Traditionally an art of the Left, realism provides Joan Semmel with a means of articulating feminist issues. The 55-year-old artist lives in New York City and has been exhibiting since 1973. Semmel says she turned from abstraction to realism in the early '70s because "I needed a



**Day in the City, 1984-85, an oil on canvas by Sidney Goodman, who paints social and political allegories. Here, an urban crowd responds to a lecturer.**

COURTESY TERRY DINTERFAS, INC.

concrete narrative to put forward what I was interested in." Her ambitious *Changing Room* (1988) shows women gazing at their reflections in the mirrors of a locker room. According to Semmel the work "deals with the specific that connects to the sociological. The locker room painting," she explains, "presents women of different ages fighting growing old. And what's more shameful than being old in our culture?" Semmel uses realism to wrest images of women from the idealized, sentimental, and erotic contexts in which they have traditionally appeared. However, rather than presuming objectivity or "truth," Semmel's descriptive illusionism merely sets the stage for her subject—women searching for their own "truths," or identities. This harks back to 19th-century realism, which was born from Courbet's desire to talk about himself rather than history or mythology.

Semmel's work, which depicts human beings actively seeking a believable reality, states openly the message of all good realism: the view out the realist window depends on the vantage and values of the looker. The multiplicity of realist styles suggests that the "truth" of realism is not objective and universal, but subjective and personal. As opposed to the naturalism of the Renaissance, contemporary realism never asserts that by surveying appearance we can know the world. Rather, the realist image communicates private realities; the conventions and techniques of the style serve as a working vocabulary.

In the 20th century Courbet's solipsism was elevated to the status of philosophy by the Abstract Expression-



**The concern with growing old in our society is conveyed in Joan Semmel's *Changing Room*, 1988, oil on canvas, in which women confront their own images.**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

ists, who found an entire universe within the self. The contemporary realists—their extroverted offspring—extended the boundaries of self to include their everyday surroundings, replacing gesture, which for the Abstract Expressionists was a sort of spiritual thumbprint, with autobiographical images. Realism also downgraded the physical act of painting in favor of perception, thought of not as a neutral recording camera lens but as a means of exploring the psyche. In other words, the mode of inquiry shifted. As the critic Donald Kuspit puts it, "Realism can generate a certain kind of awareness of an inner or alternative reality. It can remind us that reality is not a stable thing."

At this point the future of realism looks uncertain. Can it once again gather force as a movement, or will it survive only in the esoteric practice of a few stubborn individuals? The increasing commercialization of the visual arts has intensified the demand for glitzy, sexy painting,

and realism—already ostracized thanks to a lingering bias against styles that borrow from the premodernist past—doesn't qualify. As Sidney Goodman points out, "Realism doesn't lend itself to glamour; it never seems to have star quality." The reasons aren't hard to find. Representations of an artist's relatives and backyard are often too specific and personal to have broad appeal. Few collectors want a portrait of someone else's friends hanging in their foyer.

Yet despite the glamour deficit, realism remains, according to critic Arthur Danto, "one of the overwhelming impulses of art." Although cautious in his predictions, he nevertheless asserts: "If, in a crude way, abstraction, expressionism, and depiction are the three main impulses of art—and as long as there's a kind of pluralism—then realism will always exist as a standing option." ■