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**LATE
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Richard Hennessy: The Blue Theater (Charles Ludlam 1943-87), 1987, oil on canvas, 90 by 96 inches.

Abstract Baroque

Using opulent forms, intense colors and theatrical techniques, Richard Hennessy creates nonfigurative paintings and murals that exuberantly contest the modernist doctrine of flatness.

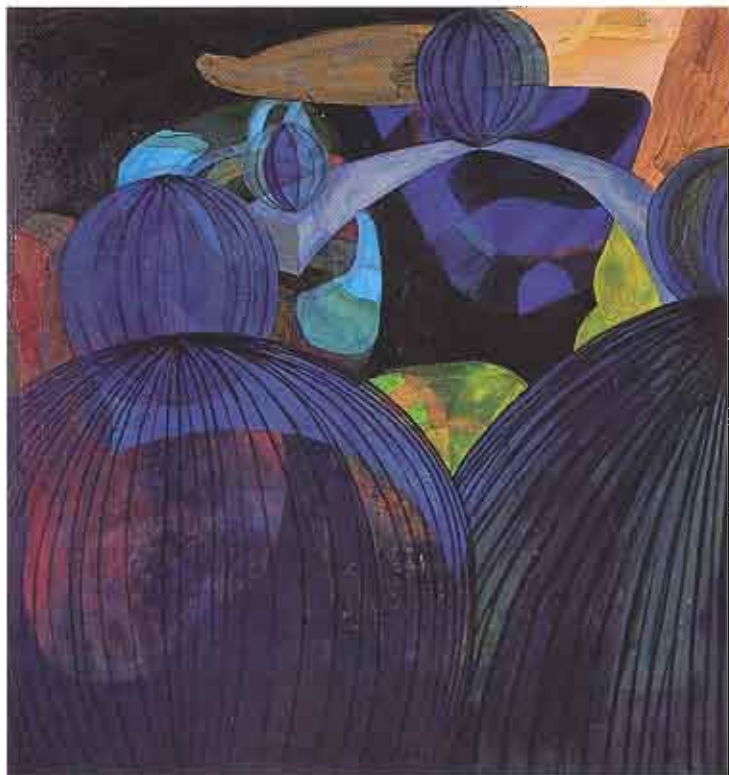


Warped in Space, 1987, oil on canvas, 46 by 47 inches.

BY BROOKS ADAMS

Richard Hennessy is very often my favorite painter: I have followed his work since 1975, when I first heard about this wonderful artist who lived up near Spanish Harlem, painted homages to Rossellini's *Rise of Louis XIV* and had a living-room ceiling that was the most incredible color of blue. Throughout the late '70s and into the '80s, Hennessy had an indelible influence on my taste in music, books, movies and art; and his running critique of the art world provided a much-needed tonic for a young art historian turned critic.

Today, Hennessy still lives in the same railroad apartment on First Avenue near 96th Street, in a fifth-floor walk-up that I consider one of the more eccentric enfilades in this or any other city. Although he has retreated ever more surely from the doings of the contemporary art world, he continues to make abstract paintings of an almost staggering sumptuousness and riches. These are emphatically traditional, modernist abstractions with pointed references to theater, architecture, literature and music. From Hennessy, who created a certain stir in the mid-'80s with his polemical praise of de Kooning and late Picasso at the expense of Pollock, Johns and Stella



Universal Majesty, 1989, oil on canvas,
47 by 44 inches.

Hennessey conceives pictorial space as a complex and contradictory entity— alternately concave and convex, folding inward and outward, overlapping itself.

[see his essay "The Man Who Forgot How to Paint," *A.i.A.*, Summer '84], these paintings come as a passionate argument in favor of intense colorism, variegated composition and comedic lightness of being.

Taking issue with the paradigm of modernist flatness, Hennessey has subverted it in an especially insidious way, by remaining technically within the limits of two-dimensional painting. The increase of pictorial complexity in his recent work comes as a continuing fight against what he sees as the reductive tendencies of the Pollock-Johns-Stella legacy. Furthermore, for Hennessey, Minimalism and its progeny are a species of spiritual poverty. Even the complex high relief that became a staple of so much '80s "official" painting (Stella, Murray, Salle, Schnabel . . .) is, for our artist, a form of cheating. His own canvases remain emphatically flat, even relatively thin, while maintaining extraordinary illusions of volume and depth. His mentor in this respect is Hans Hofmann, the great overlooked master of the New York School, whose lessons are only now being relearned in Hofmann's first thorough museum survey (recently at the Whitney). Hennessey consistently defended Hofmann through the '70s and '80s; now the younger artist's point of view is gaining new critical acceptance.



Thai, 1989, oil on canvas,
55 by 48 inches.

Hennessey hooks into the *malerisch* tradition of European painting; his new works suggest Baroque effulgences of matter and light. He conceives pictorial space as a complex and contradictory entity, alternately concave and convex, folding inward and outward, endlessly overlapping itself. The image of a colossal cornucopia often comes to mind when looking at the new paintings, which are more moderately scaled than his production of the early '80s—a period when Hennessey was best known for either very large or very small works. His elaborate use of oil paint, often relying on sophisticated glazing techniques, can strike some viewers as almost too epicurean and his literary titles as too erudite or too clever, but for me, they hold up over time. Around 1985, the arabesques in his paintings became increasingly intense. Looping in and out, over and under each other in *Leaping Laocoön* (1985), they almost seemed to be chasing their own tail. I frankly began to worry at this development; it seemed like the onset of a full-fledged *maniera* (Hennessey had recently spent a month in Rome), and I wondered if that whiplash was going to ossify into a contortion. Now, five years later, the painter's *figura serpentinata* has, if anything, become even speedier and more various. Forms whiz by one another, carried on the heady stream of his brushstrokes, as bright as glowworms, as they buzz around through Hennessey's almost comically elastic pictorial field.

Secondary imagery frequently crops up in Hennessey's abstraction, at least to this observer's eye. A panoply of faces and figures can be read into the paintings' sense of complex movement. For the artist, who has been extensively involved with the music of Elliott Carter (Hennessey's *Kuba* of 1983 was used on the album cover of Carter's *In Sleep, In Thunder/Triple Duo*), the overlapping incidents in a single painting are akin to the overlapping tempi in Carter's music. Hennessey's abstract anecdotes can suggest a welter of narratives, but usually they seem to be *about* the gradual release of time; this is



Venini 1845, 1988, oil on canvas, 48 by 52 inches. Sloane Collection, Los Angeles.

literally built into their subtly layered compositions. A 1990 work, *Plunging into Pleasure*, with its series of pink and blue fleshy forms, only slowly coalesces as a secondary image. At first, *Plunging* seems almost unfinished, and entirely abstract; then it yields the suggestion of an enormous phallus penetrating a whirlpool/orifice at the bottom center of the painting. Such an explicit reference is rarely, if ever, an a priori decision on the artist's part (and Hennessy's titles are usually after the fact, too). Yet once these secondary images have been seen, they cannot be *unseen*.

Hennessy's work can also be understood as a drama of domestic objects. *Venini 1845* (1988) epitomizes the many aspects of still life in his ostensibly abstract art. It's a big, crazy painting with a lot going on. The title seems to allude to an Italian glass vase from the Venini factory in Venice: this can be glimpsed in the amoeboid form floating in the upper left-hand corner of the canvas; the "1845," however, refers to the artist's street address. The vase form is only one element of this teeming abstraction. A red ginger-jar shape hovers at lower left, and a shower of gold circles transpires at right, recalling representations of Danaë in paintings by Titian, Rembrandt and Greuze. An ambiguous brown, vented form at the lower right of the painting summons up a wooden shutter, a slatted enclosure or

perhaps an antique rolltop desk. This multivalent image is one of the most resonant in Hennessy's recent work; it appears in a number of paintings.

The artist has consistently inflected modernist flatness to attain a sensation of deep volume with perspectival or scenographical vantages. A medium-sized work, *Warped in Space* (1987), shows brown/red arcs that suggest a *di sotto in su* interior view of the Guggenheim Museum being stretched out and invaded by clamorous cones and net shapes. Hennessy has recently developed another hieroglyph of architectural space in the form of a splayed-out arch form which recalls the spans of bridges (three of which, traversing the East River, can be seen from his studio window). This spanning device, seemingly an architectural representation in an otherwise abstract field, crops up in works such as *Bridging* (1985), *Ruffing It* (1986) and *Tarkovsky* (1987). In the last work, an homage to the Russian filmmaker who died the year it was painted, a white moon shape hovers over green-black arc shapes that evoke benches in a landscape. (Hennessy's references to formal gardens both Western and Oriental abound: see his early '80s work based on a book about Chinese gardens, and his 1990 canvas *Calloway Gardens*.)



Just Off Mindanao, 1989, oil on canvas, 58 by 61 inches.

An evocation of *theatrum mundi*, or Baroque court theater aggrandizing Everyman, is an even more tangible subject in the artist's large paintings, as evidenced by such titles as *El Teatro de la Grandeza* (1986) and *The Blue Theater* (Charles Ludlam 1943-87) of 1987.¹ The latter work, in particular, is a moving testament to the great man of the theater who died of AIDS at 44. From Hennessy, whose 1978 murals for Ludlam's playhouse in the West Village have achieved an insider's cult status in their own right, *The Blue Theater* can be seen as a public-private elegy to a close friend—a Noh play of ennobling lessons. The painting calls to mind a wide-angle view of a proscenium, as seen from the stage, with the arcs of the balconies seemingly projecting away from us. It also suggests a huge head surmounted by a '20s-style tiara such as Ludlam wore in roles like Salambô. Then, too, there are oval shapes that seemingly march forward and overlap, functioning like Mansardesque oculi and suggesting other metaphors; the form at bottom center takes on an almost mineral texture, and the ovals may be seen as planets. All these possible themes remain subsumed under glazes of a monochrome, loosely brushed blue, the Symbolist color of dreams (also reminiscent of Miró's 1961 blue-field paintings).

Hennessy's cosmic references continue unabated in the recent

work. In *Starting* (1986), a large yellow vertical-format canvas, a profusion of prism shapes and polka-dot forms seem to burst forth from a tiny dot at the center of the painting, perhaps paralleling some Big-Bang theory (such as the artist is always reading about in books on the universe). In *Universal Majesty* (1989), the theme of the planets becomes explicit in the transparent, striated globes spinning in lush blue-green darkness with a streak of peach at the top. And in *Flying Colors* (1990), with its dark, galactic penumbra and orange, vented protagonist, I get the sense that somehow even the venetian-blind form can be blasted into outer space.

Encapsulating the theatrical and the domestic, Hennessy has recently painted a new mural in his apartment. It is a colossal blue-and-yellow scroll on the inside of his front door (a door he incidentally hardly ever uses, preferring to enter through the kitchen) which stands adjacent to a much-photographed earlier mural he painted on his living-room wall in the late '70s, *after* doing the Ridiculous Theatrical Company lobby. The new scrolling wall painting transforms the door into a deep, glowing piece of architectural ornament: a crazy, tiny, screened-off cabinet of space marked by a huge synecdoche of an ogival shape, richly detailed with black, red



Plunging into Pleasure, 1990, oil on canvas, 61 by 60 inches.

and white brush marks. Ten years after the de Kooningesque mural nearby, Hennessy's new painted C-scroll looks even more decisive, exuberant and unrepentantly opulent. By analogy with the murals at the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, which look rather neo-'60s, flower-power, hard-edge and even mod, the bold black-and-white floral forms of the theater stairwell have been resurrected in his apartment as a distinctly private, late-'80s rococo conceit.

In other recent works, the artist's theater seems to have decamped to points east, as the titles *Thai* and *Just Off Mindanao* suggest. *Thai* (1989) takes the Hennessy whiplash and elaborates it until it becomes a frenzied allover pattern. The painting remains internally balanced, almost symmetrical—there is a round red orb in the middle that suggests the seed of a fruit, a brain or perhaps a cutaway view of the human head. A slatted red shape at the upper center summons up the idea of a cosmic ventilation or filtering system with curvilinear fins that accentuate the illusion of break-neck speed in the other painted arabesques.

Just Off Mindanao (1989), by contrast, seems to limn subaqueous slowness in one of those imagined places that have always been on Hennessy's compass. Although he has never visited the Philippines, he remains an avid armchair peripatetic. The man who does not own

a TV remains surprisingly up on current events, obsessed with *Born on the Fourth of July*, a devoted fan of *Eddie Murphy's Raw*, and an artist whose swirling arabesques have often been influenced by the mannerist poses captured in sports photography. In *Just Off Mindanao* he visualizes the reef (reportedly springing from one of the deepest spots in the ocean) as a series of soft, undulating circles and overlapping areas of deep blues and browns, which seemingly drift apart to reveal hot pinks, oranges and yellows—incipient fish forms, perhaps, and vague hints of vegetation. Here Hennessy reveals himself at his most dreamily Matissean: looking out of his studio window at the East River, he seems to inhabit not just the fishbowl but the fish, and not just the aquarium but the profoundest depths of the sea. □

1. The term *theatrum mundi* is borrowed from Gert Schiff, "The Musketeer and His *Theatrum Mundi*," in *Picasso: The Last Years, 1963-1973*, New York, George Braziller, 1983.

Author: Brooks Adams wrote the Belgian and Dutch chapter for *World Impressionism, due out from Abrams this fall.*