



Richard Hennessy, *Look Up and Live*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 108 x 81".
Courtesy Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art.

LOOK UP AND LIVE: THE RECENT PAINTINGS OF RICHARD HENNESSY

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There was a medium-sized painting in Richard Hennessy's last exhibition (September, 1982) that is as good a place to start as any. Titled *Bonnard's Tablecloth* (1982), it depicts one-point perspectival recession in an otherwise abstract pictorial space. The colors in the painting are off-white, red, and green, recalling the washable plastic tablecloths one found in diners and cafeterias throughout America in the '50s. Hennessy used the off-white to depict a checkerboard pattern (again recalling the tablecloths) of tapering rectangles. His one-point perspectival recession, however, bears comparison to the computer graphics employed in such recent movies as *Star Wars*. The red was applied in a gestural graffitiist manner, a sly homage to '50s

Action painting. That Hennessy could make allusions to Bonnard, the artistic milieu of the '50s, and science fiction movie extravaganzas simultaneously should suggest how much command he has over a body of knowledge ranging from art history to trivia.

In being obvious about the contradictions between perspectival space and abstract space (its suggestion of infinity) to the point of goofiness, Hennessy conveys his expansive brand of ironic humor about the tyrannical givens inherent in abstraction. Instead of allowing a shallow, cubist-derived space to dominate all possible choices, Hennessy transforms his self-consciousness and deep awareness of art history into catalysts, liberators of his imagination. In fact, one of Hennessy's fortes is his balletic ability to pay homage to the past and mock it at the same time. Unlike the narrow and adolescent humor of much current art, Hennessy's humor is not only expansive but mature. It is gregarious and not made of cruel one-liners. It is filled with witty asides, not sadistic condescension. If one considers the kinds of humor various artists have achieved, then Hennessy belongs in the same company as James Joyce and Buster Keaton rather than "All in The Family" and Don Rickles.

Shortly after his last exhibition, Hennessy began reevaluating his accomplishments. The conclusions he reached led him to make a number of significant decisions about what he would do next. The six paintings he finished by September of this year reveal that he not only decided to focus his attention and efforts on a large scale but also decided to push the spatial contradictions even further. He began, in other words, to test his limitations, to see what he was capable of. Even for a longtime follower of Hennessy's career, the results are unexpected and boldly dramatic.

In each of the six paintings one can see painterly passages, harsh graphic lines, cartoon-like drawing, hard-edged shapes, brash disruptive colors, and numerous contradictory perspectives (layered space, perspectival recession, architectonic and abstract space) simultaneously. What is remarkable about these paintings is that Hennessy is always in full command. It is as if he were flying a spaceship, writing a symphony, and memorizing the paintings of Velázquez and Raphael at the same time.

If art history is something that has been used in recent years by artists as diverse as Philip Guston (his use of Piero della Francesca), Jasper Johns (his use of Edvard Munch and Jackson Pollock), and Malcolm Morley (his use of Chaim Soutine, Vermeer, and Constable), then what Hennessy has made are Abstract History paintings. There are allusions to Venetian architecture and artists as various as Titian and Tintoretto, Velázquez and Veronese. At the same time, the paintings do not look back at history with nostalgic longing. They do not idealize the past or romanticize the heroic artist in an heroic age. The painterly passages, bright colors, and multiple perspectives are contemporary in the humor and dissonance they convey. Hennessy has what the great Russian critic M. M. Bakhtin called "a dialogic imagination." His paintings are made up of fragmented "languages" in endless war with each other. Going beyond contradiction, Hennessy made this war, this awareness of all the choices made in art history, the subject of his paintings.

Hennessy's *The Siege of Breda* (1982) alludes to Velázquez's *The Surrender at Breda*. In Velázquez's painting the act of surrender is conducted in a gentlemanly fashion; courtesy and respect are an inextricable part of everyone's actions, whether victor or vanquished. War is something that takes place between civilized men. The architectonic underpinning (Velázquez's use of verticals and diagonals, for example) helps to focus the viewer's attention on the meeting taking place at the center of the painting. History paintings such as Velázquez's not only depict numerous individualized figures within architectonically constructed space, but the most successful ones are carefully and tightly orchestrated. Consequently, the viewer must not only pause at each detail but must be directed toward the dominant dramatic action. The hierarchical connection between the minor supporting figures and the major ones demands a ceaseless visual flow from the central drama to the outer edges and back again.

What is truly remarkable about Hennessy's painting is that he is able to transform these historical particulars into something



Richard Hennessy, *Birth of Time*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 84 x 108". Courtesy Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art.

fresh and unencumbered. In *The Siege of Breda* black lines thrust in from all edges and corners toward an outlined rectangle occupying the upper middle of the painting. These lines and the round floral-like shapes placed along the edges are drawn in a matter-of-fact manner. While the lines direct our attention to the upper middle of the painting, the shapes delay us, like a series of pleasant, rotund strangers asking for directions. Not only do the lines and shapes suggest a dramatic perspectival recession in space, but they also allude to Spanish architectural ironwork. Wavering between clumsiness and sophistication, their sturdy bluntness is emotional and direct.

Over this perspectival construct Hennessy has painted yellow, maroon, and green abstract passages. These passages coagulate into abstract "presences" and the spatial construct becomes their stage. There are delicately modulated ribbons of paint, as well as scumbling, aggressively rapid passages, and scratching into wet surfaces. What Hennessy sets in motion are a number of different kinds of space. There is the layered physical space of a brighter color over a darker one and vice versa, the perspectival space, and the discrepancy between the painterly passages and the receding architectonic space. At the same time, the drawing conveys an inward-thrusting illusionistic space while the bright yellow, for example, advances from the picture plane in an optically aggressive manner.

The siege Hennessy's painting conveys is between the architectonic structure of the lines (the fort, so to speak) and the painterly passages (the abstract "presences"). It is a war between order and freedom, painting and drawing, color and graphic contrasts of dark and light. Like many of the paintings being done today, *The Siege of Breda* is both highly theatrical and confrontational. The difference, however, between Richard Hennessy's paintings and Julian Schnabel's, say, is in the degree of painterly and intellectual resources each artist possesses. Whereas Schnabel hopes to connect to the art of the past through a clumsy, humorless gesture, Hennessy's thorough familiarity with past accomplishments does not require him to overburden his surfaces. Hennessy knows that a conspicuous consumption of materials is no substitute for intelligence and perception.

Of the six large paintings Hennessy finished since the fall of 1982, *Look Up and Live* (1983) is to my mind the most subtle and most suavely accomplished of the group. While it might not have the brash visual punch of *Deus Ex Machina* (1983), it is both more witty and slyer in its allusions. Within the painting's vertical format Hennessy has depicted a curving architectural



Richard Hennessy, *Deus Ex Machina*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 72 x 144". Courtesy Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art.

space. Pinched in the middle to further dramatize the illusionistic space, the curving horizontal bands of brown and green at the top and lower middle of the painting push into a bluish abstract space. Unlike the contradictory space in *Bonnard's Tablecloth*, Hennessy has gotten two vastly different kinds of space to coexist in a seamless way in *Look Up and Live*. The architectonic space in the upper half of the painting may have had its source in the barrel-vaulted chancel in Piero della Francesca's last major painting, his *Madonna and Child with Saints*, while the lower part of the painting resembles an inverted oculus. The painting invites the viewer to look up while conveying the feeling that the ground is opening up onto a bottomless space.

Against the architectonic space Hennessy depicts abstract shapes, ragged-edged triangles around a reddish circular shape occupying the upper middle of the composition. The reddish circle is the dominant dramatic presence, while the triangles function in a way that is similar to the various personae around the Madonna. Meanwhile, the small white circle at the top of the painting is a distractional device, both an irritant and a pearl. Consequently, the painting has two distinct focal points, the reddish circle and the smaller white one. This is a painting which the viewer both looks at and looks up at. The feelings of tragic exaltation one associates with Renaissance altarpieces have been transformed by Hennessy into a sweetly humorous transcendence. If any religion or belief is being espoused here, it is a faith in the restorative powers of art. The title of the painting is both self-righteously assertive and self-mocking. It is also a declaration of the artist's freedom and his belief in the possibilities of art. *Look Up and Live* is to date the crowning achievement of Hennessy's career.