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Essentials: Chris Cran: The Physics of Admiration

by Nancy Tousley

Chris Cran is one of those artists whose body of work, if you were not familiar with it, might look like it was created by a few different people. The painter switches styles to suit his needs. He thinks of the studio as a place to conduct R & D, works fast, with a tendency to work in series, and is a prolific painter. He has the hubris to be funny and to pursue beauty seriously, at the same time. The kick for him is in the idea. This, whatever it is, he knocks around, tries on, repeats, varies, changes and might after a while drop, only, perhaps, to pick it up again later on. Some of his brainstorming develop into full-blown series, others bring on intermittent showers, some produce thunderous, lightning-speed one-offs. Cran likes theatre: he dramatizes ideas, plays them out in as many ways as he can think of and always seems to have a backlog of things he wants to do. An inspired post-Pop painter, Cran has learned his licks (and stolen some) from Warhol, Lichtenstein and Richter. My Chris Cran - I say *my* because so much depends on who is doing the looking - is an artist whose greatest affinity is for Pop. He is irresistibly attracted to popular culture and kitsch, uses photography and its processes as a source and makes smart, intellectually fizzy paintings that play dumb. He sees the face of desire in the graphics on packages of '50s toys. And he can say, with a straight face and without weighting one more heavily than the other, that the two artists in the background of his "Self-Portrait Paintings" are Caravaggio and Norman Rockwell.

The very first painting in the "Self-Portrait" series, *Self-Portrait With Large Audience-Trying To Remember What Carmelita Pope Looks Like* (1984), lays out the coordinates of Cran's work - the self-conscious artist forming a mental image, the viewer (or audience in front of whom this happens) and the image itself, the idea or thought that's given a material embodiment or mechanism. Like the new painting made by the generation of artists behind him, Cran's work would be unthinkable without the legacy of Pop art and conceptualism. Cran's paintings are about painting: how to make it, how it works, how it affects the viewer and how the viewer receives it. These things, which place emphasis on conceptual, technical and perceptual processes and the artist's role, are what he thinks about most, whatever else might be going on in the pictures. Underpinning his enterprise are the persistent presences of the cartoon, the photograph and the camera.

The largest undertaking of his work is its exploration of painting's condition in the age of mechanical reproduction, but without Walter Benjamin's concern for the disappearance of the aura. In every work, Cran implicitly measures the power and effects of painting against those of photography and imagery made for reproduction and reproductive techniques - magazine illustration, commercial graphics, advertising, cartoons, comics, half-tones, negatives, photo-silkscreens - all of which depend on the camera. Painting always wins, hands down. If the persona's pose in *Self-Portrait With Large Audience* recalls the posture of a mentalist it could be in recognition of painting's alchemy.

Cran's self-consciousness is the self-conscious awareness of a postmodernist. Not long before he graduated from art college, at age 29, he went to Edmonton to hear Clement Greenberg speak. It was in the late 1970s, when the aging dean of American art criticism was invited several times to Edmonton to lecture and give studio crits. By this time, however, Greenberg's theories had ossified into what Leo Steinberg dubbed, in a well-known essay of 1972, "preventive aesthetics." This, Steinberg explains, is "the attitude that tells an artist what he ought not to do, and the spectator what he ought not to see." Hearing Greenberg's dogma from the horse's mouth, Cran's reaction was "How dare he?" The critic fascinated the artist and provoked him to do the opposite of what "Clem said," the dicta that because of Greenberg's tremendous influence had come to define modernism in the dominant view.

The "Self-Portrait Paintings" are literary (a no-no in Clemdom) in the lowest sense - of pulp fiction, illustration, even comic books. The anecdotal paintings are like cartoons in pre-modernist realist dress, prankish, funny and filled with pop-culture references, from the styles of 1940s, 50s and 60s illustration alluded to by Cran's inflections of style to the straw party hat worn by his naive, eager-for-experience persona. Cran built this parody brilliantly on his own position as a late bloomer, beginning a practice on the margins of the art world, by creating the persona who jumps into the careerist art scene of the 1980s with such cheerful enthusiasm. The persona's task is to invent himself as an artist and, by the end of the "Self-Portrait" series, his success has been cinched. His 15 minutes of fame have been secured by several "Portraits of the Artist by Andy Warhol" (1988-1990), a series within a series, of which *Double Negative Portrait of the Artist by Andy Warhol*, whose dark wit recalls *Self-Portrait as Max Beckmann* (1986), is but one very tasty example.

Cran produced the "Warhols" by mimicking the recently deceased Pop mastermind's own process - Warhol and Cran both worked with photo silkscreens - and trumped the original idea. By painting a shadow under the painting within the painting, Cran transforms it into an object in a fictional space.

Thus the Warhols of the persona are not copies or fakes but illusionistic representations of paintings that appear to be hung on a wall represented by the background. Warhol didn't paint his own paintings anyway, but got others to do it for him; who's to question these as unauthentic? The "Portraits of the Artist by Andy Warhol" are keen gamesmanship.

Once the persona is represented as the subject of a "Warhol" painting, the character steps out of the frame. He becomes as one with his creator, who probably begins to think harder, around this time, about painting as an activity whose inherent subject is itself. The Warhols can be seen as the metaphor - painting in a frame - for Cran's entire oeuvre up to now. I like to think of the persona, whom we watched invent his artist-self, as the maker of all the work that follows the "Self-Portrait Paintings" and "Portraits of the Artist by Andy Warhol." The conceit ties them conceptually to the rest of Cran's oeuvre - just the kinds of paintings that a talented mimic and irreverent son-of-Pop at play in the fields of representation would make.

Their subject matter encompasses the traditional genres of painting: still life, landscape, portrait heads, crowds, hands, abstracts. But the way they are made distinguishes them. On a cue from Warhol and Richter, Cran turns away from parody of the autographic act to look at process as the generative act of painting, away from realist works that take weeks or months to complete, to "Stripe Paintings" (1989-90) and "Half-tone Paintings" (1990-93) he can make in a day, to the "Abstracts" (1993-96) he can whip off in a few minutes. The three series explore the space of painting, playing against ideal modernist flatness to create an interplay of surface and depth in which something actually happens, a perceptual event occurs.

As the series title implies, the "Half-tone Paintings" are based on greatly enlarged, deteriorated half-tone images from pulp magazines. The subjects are heads, including those of a ventriloquist's dummy and a German shepherd dog. Vertical stripes "hold" and disrupt the flat surface, while, appearing to lie behind them, the dots of the half-tone screen reconstitute the photographic image, coalescing into a head or falling apart into an abstraction, depending upon the viewing distance. The mechanics of the illusion are revealed. *Pink Laughing Women* (1990) complicates matters by having two heads, with one woman being closer to the picture plane. The painting is theatrical; the two heads invoke an audience looking at the viewer looking. The protagonists of the play are painting, photography and mechanical reproduction. The drama being acted out on the line between representation and abstraction is the making and unmaking of the image, the masking and unmasking of the illusion, the deceiving and undeceiving of the beholder's eye.

After all, this is painting's game: calling attention to art. The "Abstracts" are the most explicit statement of this proposition in all of Cran's work. The several serial variations within this series—"Monochromes," "Silver Paintings," "Clear Paintings" and "Screen Paintings"—all stem from the idea of the anti-gestural brushstroke, as developed in Lichtenstein's rendering of an Abstract Expressionist brushstroke as a cartoon, combined with the idea of photography as a process that produces images on a sensitized surface through the action of light. The shimmering "Silver Paintings" mimic the now-you-see-it now-you-don't surface of the daguerreotype. The curving switch-back brushstroke that moves with inexorable energy towards the picture plane of *Silver Painting #5* (1995) is created by one mechanistic, back-and-forth pass of a wide brush down the centre of the painting, from top to bottom. Literally a sign for abstraction, the elusive, effervescent image is created by the interaction of light and silver paint hitting the ridges in clear gel made by the drag of the brush. It is an image that is completed in the eye, that equates the viewer's eye with the camera's.

Cran's "Abstracts" parody High Modernist abstraction, as if its rarefied means had the corner on beauty and the invocation of the sublime, and offer a cartoon version of an industrial sublime that is mechanical and repeatable. The idea is related to *Magic Art Reproducer* (1978), a painting Cran made as a student, which shows a simple camera-obscura device in front of which float the Greek letters alpha and omega, signifying the beginning and the ending, or everything between. This early work juxtaposes stripped-down versions of art and being as the terms of a philosophical proposition: art can turn things in the world into ideas and ideas into objects that give a material reality to abstractions. The "Abstracts," which are made by a system based on the mechanics of the body, the motion of the arm assisted by gravity, suggest that the artist himself is the art reproducer.

This is a very Warholian idea: did Andy not say everybody should be a machine? And yet *Silver Painting #5* still delivers the metaphysical goods. It is painting as tantalizing, all-seductive surface, as window on the unknown, as mirror of human yearning, a compendium of painting's three traditional roles: window, mirror, surface.

Pretty Picture (1998), a representation of a painting or mirror in a cartoony, decorative, gold-coloured frame, presents an elegant summary of painting-as-genre. Between 1997 and 1999, Cran played with cartoon signs for genres—portrait, still life, landscape, seascape—piling genre upon genre. One of a series of "Framing Device Paintings" (1998-99), *Pretty Picture* represents a culmination of that work and is, on its own, a tour de force. The silvery surface inside the frame is an abstract, cubistic patchwork of lights and darks, a photographic space, a Lichtenstein-inspired field of signs for reflections. Meanwhile, the drawing of the frame and the proportions of the picture, isolated in the centre of a solid-colour

background, allude to big portrait heads in ornate frames, to windows with their curtains open and to decorative mirrors. That the world can so suddenly flood the mysterious interior of this painting seems marvellous, and it is all projection.

And, now, it's time to talk again about theatre, which Michael Fried has said results when genres get too close to each other. Cran closed the "Self-Portrait" series, which was capped by *Loved By Millions* (1989), a video work in which the persona comes to life as an art star, because, in a confusion of art and life, people began to expect Cran to be the persona or at least to behave like the character in the paintings. But Cran is a painter, as he says, not a performance artist, and so the persona was absorbed by the painter. Nonetheless, there is a performative element in Cran's work. It has to do with narrative and with perception, it is enacted by the viewer, and this enactment completes the work. It is the viewer, according to Cran, whose interaction with a work of art creates its poetry.

Faced with a Cran, the viewer's role changes from passive to active, through engagement with the work as a reader or as a perceiving body capable of reverie. *Elmer Goes For Popcorn* (1999) calls on both of these roles of the viewer in a particular way. The setting is a movie theatre, and the viewer is immediately pulled into a little narrative to become a member of the theatre audience. Some idiot, a silhouetted figure that resembles the cartoon character Elmer Fudd, is blocking the audience's view of the screen and a trailer for "the greatest musical ever." The narrative set-up is not unlike those of the "Self-Portrait Paintings." Behind Elmer, the upturned faces of a crowd gaze ecstatically at something outside of the frame. In front of him, we can imagine a grumpy audience whose thwarted gaze becomes interested when it recognizes what might be a famous profile. The rapt gaze is thwarted yet again, however, by the realization that its target is not a solid figure but the negative space of a cutout, formed by the contoured edges of two painted wooden panels and backed with black. The gaze is trying to fix upon something that isn't there, a fiction concocted by perceptual tricks and made convincing for a while at least by its narrative context.

Cran addresses the interaction of the gaze with the rhetoric of painting and the misrepresentation of representation and its different languages in all of his work. The cartoon rests on the surface like a layer superimposed upon the modernist project that recalls and connects it to other histories. If modernism did not exist, Cran's work would not be what it is: a postmodern hybrid of low forms, high ideals and adroitly scrambled visual codes. *The Physics of Admiration* (2003), from the new "Pop Paintings" series, so clearly shows this hybridity it's as though it were a sampler and a synthesis of his oeuvre. The taxi-cab yellow painting returns handily to the subject of self-portraiture with a triple image. There is a fictional painter, his reflection in a mirror and his likeness in the painting he's

making at his easel. The idea stems in part from Norman Rockwell's *Triple Self-Portrait* (1960), said to be about the process of self-portraiture. Cran parodies the process in a cartoon that has the visual structure of collage, something new to his work. His nerdy, bespectacled artist is a half-tone reproduction, the self-portrait painting a sign for realism, the mirror reflection a monochromatic "photographic" image that flips from positive to negative. This magical shift occurs in the reflected head with changes of viewing angle because of the way in which the multidirectional brushstrokes reflect light. In that quicksilver moment, which takes the viewer by surprise, the painting calls out, calls attention to art to capture the gaze. And the game is once again in play in Cran's work, between rhetoric and perception, paintings and mirrors, and painting and photography. What was all that about the death of painting? I ask my post-Pop Chris Cran. And he answers, "It was just a moment of academic boredom."

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