

Eleanore Mikus, Neo-Expressionism and the Things Themselves

Mikus's relationship to Neo-Expressionism began during the years 1966-1967 with *Zoo Visit* and *Happy Holidays*, two crayon drawings both from 1966 and *Fortuna*, a painting on paper the artist made the following year. From that point, and in 1968, Mikus began work on what would prove to be an extensive body of Neo-Expressionist paintings and drawings. Working with acrylic paint, over a 17-year period she produced in total over 100 paintings, a substantive body of work which encompassed the Red series.¹

The first public outing of her Neo-Expressionist works was in 1970 in a solo exhibition at the OK Harris Gallery in New York and *Painting & Sculpture Today*, a group exhibition staged the same year at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. As the artist recounted: "My paintings were well-received, although they were way ahead in time to the neo-expressionists movement. Ivan Karp opened up OK Harris at this time and I showed the neo-expressionists paintings with him."²

In one sense, a meaningful response to the question as regards to the extent of the works' imbrication with Neo-Expressionism is not necessarily our concern here. However, if one might venture an explanation as to why these drawings and paintings are aligned with this designation it would entail, in part, their ostensible simplicity. In the case of the Tablet series of works, this was given through their pared down aesthetic, an aesthetic one might add which for some resulted in erroneously aligning them with Minimalism. However, the simplicity which marked the Neo-Expressionist works is discernible through their childlike nature that characterised the artist's approach.³ For example, *Train with Sun* (1969) a work on paper made using marker and crayon eschews conventional approaches to pictorial realism in favour of what is instead a schematic treatment of a train. Bookended by an equally schematic depiction of tree and the sun, the block colours of all three sit alongside a dark blue background arrived at through a rhythmic line that has almost entirely covered the paper.

According to a statement the artist made in relation to Neo-Expressionism: "I have always adhered in my paintings to an almost classic simplicity of expression. It is the simplicity of a child as seen through the eyes of an artist – impelling lyrical and yet close to the rhythm of childlike expression born of innocence which is all the more sophisticated for being so. It doesn't pretend – it just is."⁴ Whilst this statement is instructive with regard to understanding Mikus's own approach to Neo-Expressionism, it also is in concert with what the artist Paul Klee, writing in the first volume of his notebooks, was seeking to advocate. Certainly, by encouraging the artist to "be ready to develop, open to change; and in one's life an exalted child, a child of creation," we see Mikus's own ideas with respect to what being an artist entailed.⁵

¹ These are: *The Red Barn Train*, 1972-73, *Car*, 1972, *The Cow*, 1972, *The Cowboy*, 1972, *Cranbrook* 1952, 1972, *Crazy Horse*, 1972, *Gabrielle*, 1972, *Paul Revere*, 1972, *The Red Boiler Train*, 1972, *Red Plane*, 1972, *Spirit of St. Louis*, 1972-73, *Stature of Liberty*, 1972-73, *The Runner*, 1972-73.

² Eleanore Mikus, "Neo-Expressionist statement." Ivan Karp left The Leo Castelli Gallery in 1969 where he was hired as the first director in order to open OK Harris, his own gallery space which was located at 465 West Broadway in SoHo.

³ Robert Hobbs has claimed that the Tablets "have an almost childlike simplicity...which is all the more sophisticated for being that way." Robert Hobbs, "Shadows of the Real," in *Eleanore Mikus: Shadows of the Real*. Ithaca, New York: Groton House, 1991, p. 22.

⁴ Eleanore Mikus, "Neo-Expressionist statement."

⁵ *Paul Klee Notebooks Volume 1 The Thinking Eye*. Edited by Jürg Spiller, London: Lund Humphries, 3rd edition 1969, p. 42.

Klee was an artist that Mikus respected and in one sense, their affinities extended to encompass what was a shared interest in line. Writing in his *Notebooks*, Klee claimed that the so-called childishness of his own drawing had begun with his “linear compositions in which [he] tried to combine a concrete representation...with a pure use of the linear element.”⁶ For Mikus, and as the following statement attests, Mikus’s utilisation of line differed depending on the context of its application:

“A need for the jagged uneven but soft gentle line
A need for the hard edged line gently curved
A need for the deep line straight as an arrow and strong and moving as the wind”⁷

It is perhaps worth returning to Mikus’s assertion that the rhythm of childlike expression eschews pretence, given the fact that for many artists associated with Neo-Expressionism there was a proclivity to revert to a more basic, childlike style of mark-making. Certainly, it was the case that several artists associated with Neo-Expressionism including, but not necessarily limited to Georg Baselitz, Jean-Michel Basquiat and A. R. Penck all made work that adopted this approach. Whilst for some and presumably the artists themselves this was understood as heralding the reinstatement of painting as a fundamentally expressive medium, wholly instinctive and acultural, others were not entirely convinced. For example, Donald Kuspit, writing in *Artforum* in 1981 would assert that Neo-Expressionism “artificially reproduces the child’s perspective and thus dissolves the spirit of modern art.”⁸

Kuspit’s contention points towards the proclivity, in some cases, for Neo-Expressionism to be marked by an approach that was calculated and artistically self-conscious. The corollary of what Kuspit describes was painting’s increasing retreat into the distancing effects of irony, if not detachment. Amongst other things this becomes manifest in the various appropriationist strategies which characterised the postmodern turn. Such strategies seem far removed from Mikus’s own involvement in Neo-Expressionism, which rather than be one of detachment, worked outwards from a position of attachment to and enchantment with what Klee described, were “the things themselves, their order, and the way in which they appear.”⁹

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⁶ Ibid., p. 95.

⁷ Hobbs, “Shadows of the Real,” p. 20.

⁸ Donald Kuspit, “The New [?] Expressionism: Art As Damaged Goods,” *Artforum* Vol. 2, No. 3 (November 1981): 48.

⁹ *Paul Klee Notebooks Volume 1 The Thinking Eye*, p. 450.