

Painting in Double Negative

Jonathan Lasker's Third-Stream Abstraction

Joseph Masheck

To make paintings capable for good reason of being taken as vacant or exhausted abstractions; paintings prepared to handle underestimation as to "authenticity"; paintings that without being simplistically ironic are at once hyper-decorative and ultra-intellectual: what a tall order!

Maybe a painting by Jonathan Lasker ought to be something of a cultural embarrassment. How glibly we speak before it of postmodernity, while it is hardly a generation since a distinguished old-master art historian could get away with claiming that Manet "pursued . . . [his] lesson in a direction that involved spiritual impoverishment"¹—a statement that may be more right than Charles Sterling could have comprehended, though it would take a modernist to know. Even Bataille said that Manet "sounded the death-knell of rhetorical eloquence in painting," hardly hinting at his articulation of a whole new eloquence.² But for Baudelaire to have (famously) written to Manet, "You are only the first in the decrepitude of your art"³ now sounds indeed like sheer poetry. Having followed Lasker's work enthusiastically since early in the '80s, I can see how squares might hate it even as revisionists rejected it for a buffered yet undenied commitment to abstraction—since those mesmerized by the "economy of signs" show such small patience with what 17th-century French theory called the specific "oeconomie" of the single painting.

Allow me, then, to begin art-historically, since neither party will want to do the job. There is apparent in Lasker's work a certain high-Disneysque mode of surface display that is itself adumbrated in turn-of-the-century *Symbolisme*. I think, for instance, of the rubbery, kitsch-unforgettable shadows in the "Ave Maria" sequence of *Fantasia* (1941) as anticipated by shadows shifting across tree trunks and figures in Maurice Denis's *Procession Under the Trees*, 1892, not to mention, as equally Laskeresque, jigsaw shifts of hatching with biomorphic zones in, say, Armand Séguin's engraving *A Summer's Day* (1894). Equally relevant to Lasker are would-be folksy images by Charles Filiger (much admired by Alfred Jarry and André Breton), such as a study of a child kneeling at prayer—Lasker's basic repertory includes comparably "bent" forms—marked vertically from thigh up, horizontally below. True, Lasker's *Symbolisme* never quite keeps a straight

face, but that doesn't mean it's only a joke: wit does require that at least two terms be entertained in the mind at once, even if that is too much to expect of most citizens of the art world now. At the same time, "people" are already "talking about" our own fin-de-siècle, where Lasker has *been* for some years. Because Lasker's art assumes a kind of engineered disengagement, I notice under its sway that Filiger's devoted critic Charles Chassé found in that artist's work "beaucoup de mécanisme."³

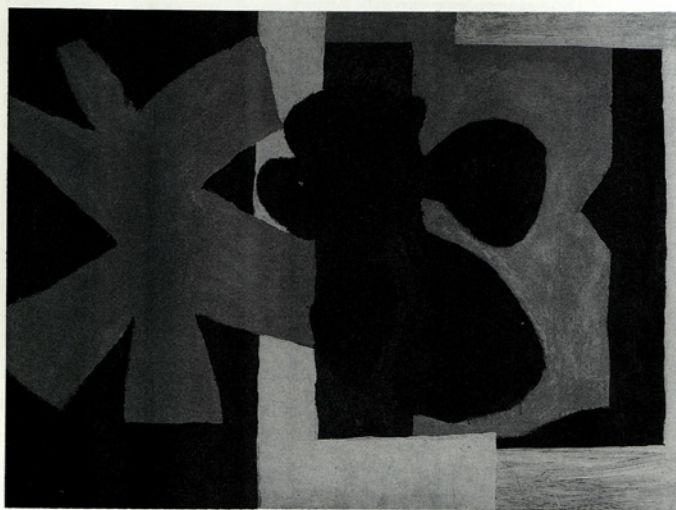
In wider cultural history, Lasker's characteristically detached, feeling-at-a-distance approach to painting—half "Look, no hands," half "Don't blame me"—also recalls 1900 as a moment of newly extreme technological detachment, what with the first atomizing, Seurat-like "data processing" of the telegraph and also, especially, I think, of the player piano, the latter having a certain interest today as paleo-computeresque. Scott Joplin (1868-1917) saw his original piano rags pirated in his own day, and had nervous breakdowns to show for it; Joshua Rifkin's deft revival of ragtime as art music only gave White America occasion for another massive effacement, since Joplin is now the anonymous sound-track composer for *The Sting* (1973). As to the piano rolls themselves, those punch-card-like records of note sequences disencumbered of Joplin's, Rifkin's, or anybody else's heart and soul: it would be interesting to speculate, in light of Lasker's specially detached abstraction, on whether "pianola" music constitutes a representation in the sense of a rendering or *rendition* (which is to say, a *mimesis*) at all. With Lasker, it is as if we got to hear Joplin live and it turned out he had worked extra hard to sound just like a pianola.

As to heavy, turnpike modernism before and after 1900, how about Manet's own *The Ham*, with its dash-like patterned wallpaper (?) background; or even for the sangfroid of the mint-green diagonal bands of its copper balustrade, not to mention the stripe effect of its shutter slats, the famous *Balcony*, of 1868? Curiously, not even in postmodernism is it easy to shake off Manet as the great progenitor (for a surprising adumbration of David Salle, check out Manet's 1874 *Monet Painting in His Studio*). But the rather videosque striated grilles of many Lasker paintings also recall a kind of horizontal hatching used in Synthetic Cubist paintings of Picasso, either as borrowed from the structural givens of a pair of shutters (*Window*, 1921) or as an imposed structural differentiation (*Table with a Cup*, 1922)—though I must contain myself here because such things nobody now wants to bother about.

In light of Lasker I also notice, in earlier American modernism, a telling likeness, overriding the two painters' discrete preoccupations, between a characteristic "leathern" fracture in the art of Marsden Hartley and the almost outrageously untransmuted materiality of Lasker's paint-job, with its reverse naturalism—like some decorative sycamore bark made in rubbery plastic in Taiwan, or pigment as margarine rather than "buttery." I am thinking, for instance, of Hartley's *West Brookville, Maine* (1939), where a heavy, solid, patchwork of painterly stucco quartered in zones of rough strips renders spruce logs as felled parallel and evenly stacked, plus regularly spaced trees still standing and about to be cut. Artist for artist, one might even find pertinent to Lasker's way of painting Hartley's personalist tender-toughness, except that Lasker's equivalent is critically *anaesthetic*.



Jonathan Lasker, *Baroque Transparency*, 1988, Oil on linen, 30" x 24". Courtesy Massimo Audiello Gallery.



Robert Motherwell, *Wall Painting*, 1950, Oil on composition board, 42 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 58".
 *President and Fellows Harvard College, Harvard University Art Museums.

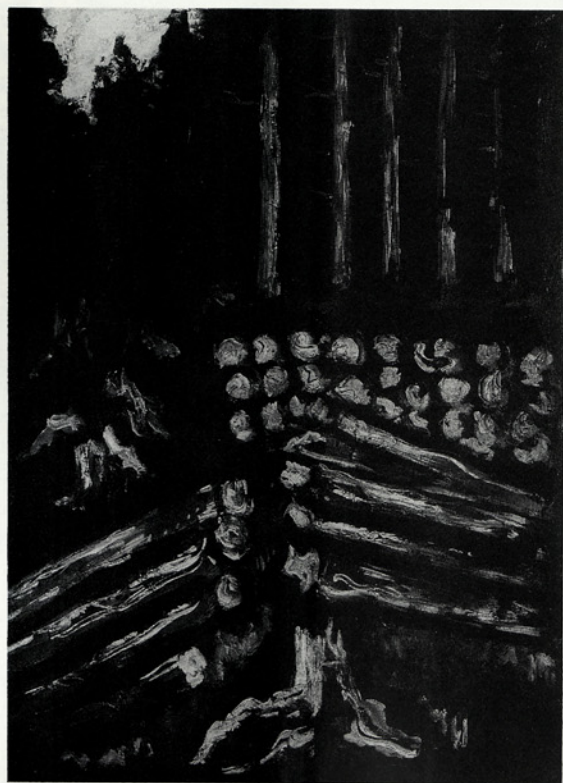
Looking so switched-off, Lasker's work shows unexpected structural affinities with that aspect of Abstract Expressionism which was knowingly Euro-Surreal. For instance, as a kind of basso supporting a melodic "figuration," his striated patches recall images by Baziotes, such as the milky *Jungle*, of 1951. What a difference of attitude, however. It is as if Lasker laid down a thin ground of, as it were, non-fat milk, and then went and put the heavy cream back on top of that: significantly, vis-à-vis French-style modernism, the two-step process makes not for intensification or rarefaction but for the opposite, an almost chemical materialism, synthetic in the common sense even if also, differently, of *Synthétisme*. Equally synthetic in the popular sense are his arch or lurid colors—which a student of mine, to Lasker's delight, once contemptuously characterized as "from the K-mart School of Color Painting."

One afternoon in the spring of 1985, I think, when Peter Nagy was in Boston and I invited him to make a double-time sweep through the Fogg, Peter pointed out the remarkably Lasker-like fusing and flat overlay of motifs in Motherwell's *Wall Painting* (1950), in which it is as if Motherwell had sought to de-apply the graphicism of Matisse's *Jazz* collages—forms in bikinis—in paint. Motherwell's work is obviously more homogenized and sedate than Lasker's. Yet in a more Beat, saxophonic way Lasker makes pink look "cool." Tellingly, even his graphic sense evokes the sophisticated Postwar style of the designer Paul Rand, including "intellectual" book jackets, in the 1950s. Lasker's paintings are altogether abstract—more purely, in fact, than they seem if you are still looking for signs of Renaissance picture structure—only they do not parade their abstraction. His is, as it were, a special kind of "third-stream," Modern Jazz Quartet sensibility.

A limply flat painting by Lasker from 1978, *5 of Spades*, evokes early Lichtenstein or Warhol even more than a famous trope of early modernist critique. Actually, James Laver, discuss-

ing playing cards in a precocious 1948 article "Good Bad Painting," observed that it was in fact only in the 19th century that playing-card designs underwent their (to us) conventional doubling, with two reversible tops, which suggests that we should be careful not to assume that before a certain point in the 1800s a reference to cards implies the anti-pictorialism of a reversible design.⁵ Now the playing-card trope for post-impressionist flatness, including Courbet's rather red-neck insult to the *Olympia*, is by now too boring to rehearse, except that, via Cézanne and Cubism, and in analogy with chess as a cerebral theme, its abstract connotation of gaming may lead into that different cliché, of art as play.

Let me interject a point from an insightful early modern aesthetician who nowadays never even has the honor of being hit-listed in anti-modernist purges, Vernon Lee. Reviewing the then-new German "empathy" theory at the turn of the century, she reached the point of suggesting that decoration itself "might be explained as a parasitic excrescence of play upon work." This was a challenge not only to the Romantic poet Schiller's idea of play as creative freedom but also to Herbert Spencer's notion of art as surplus energy discharged in free play. But "freedom," according to Lee, "is not the aim of the artistic process, but its necessary condition, since we do not act freely in order to take pleasure in freedom, but please ourselves because we happen to be free to do so."⁶ Considering Lee's reversal helps me to understand something I before only sensed, how some of the wit in Lasker's paintings depends on their looking stubbornly belabored



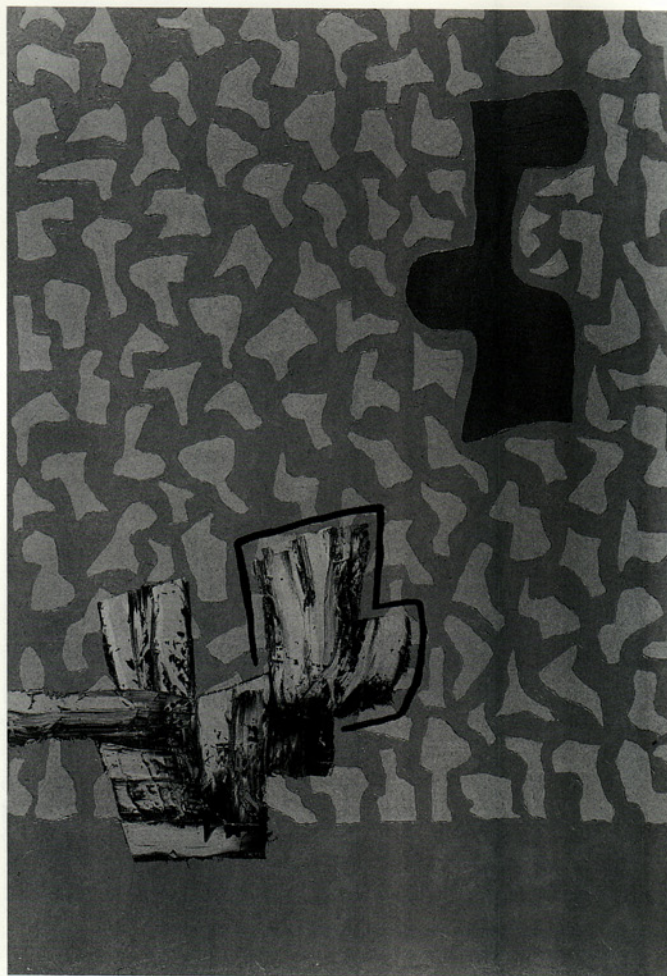
Marsden Hartley, *West Brooksville, Maine*, 1939, Oil on board, 22" x 16".
 Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.

even as they look “well-groomed.” How ruthlessly, come to think of it, Lasker handles the decorative, banging out again and again the almost the same, hardly spontaneous cadenzas and “ornamentation.”

A painting by Lasker from 1987, *Fashionable Obscurity*, has a purple, “high-key” field, like a color in a yuppie sportswear catalogue for “jocks” of no team affiliation. Onto this is applied, or rather, into it is more or less inlaid, an array of broad, strugglingly hand-drawn vertical stripes of mud-like ochre. Stripes and field alike are overlaid interruptively by twin amorphous white patches striped vertically with black, each of which is further overlaid by a linear, sign-like motif in red—a pointless hieroglyph something like a fusion of the “heart” and “spade” of playing cards. (Giving two instances of the same red motif on differently shaped but similarly striped white patches, side by side, recalls Rauschenberg’s anti-expressionist self-simulation in closely doubling painterly quirks from *Factum I* over into *Factum II*, both 1957.) Here, too, as elsewhere, Lasker juxtaposes two different *kinds* of color, as different as attitudes, one tending toward the gorgeous and at least a caricature of the feminine and the other toward a dumb *profondo* look that by rights should be a caricature of the masculine—the latter playing as if “den” pieces to the “boudoir” air of the former, or, by a stretch, baroque to their rococo.

By belabored I mean also to imply *driven*, in the sense of Artaud’s *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938)—this in spite of Jean Baudrillard’s attempt to swallow up Artaud, Pac Man-like, making him a mere “referential” of what he wrote. Take the idea of “*matter as revelation*,” suddenly dispersed in signs to teach us the metaphysical identity of concrete and abstract and to teach us this *in gestures made to last*.⁷ Thanks probably to the cult of Baudrillard, the pop-intellectual Marshall McLuhan of the ’80s, there is a current, wrongheaded sense of a “double” as some kind of deracinated simulacrum, as if, in Lasker’s case, the works were nothing more than stand-ins for abstract paintings. This is simply not what Artaud termed “the double,” which is anything but inert. A snatch or two from Artaud *in gear* shows how unsuitable to an ironically distanced posture his “double” ought to be (his definitive example being the Balinese theater): “As if waves of matter were tumbling over each other, dashing their crests into the deep and flying from all sides of the horizon to be enclosed in one minute portion of tremor and trance—to cover the void of fear.”⁸ Copying the words down, I began to think of the following in respect to a threat of anxious immobility in Lasker’s (in one sense switched-off, in another quite brazen) icings of paint: “A chaotic boiling, full of recognizable particles and at moments strangely orderly, crackles in this effervescence of painted rhythms in which the many fermatas unceasingly make their entrance like a well-calculated silence.”⁹ It’s the fermatas that really do it, by analogy with the blatant gaps in Lasker’s structures, but the nearly swooningly farfetched conviction counts too.

It cannot have escaped Lasker that his own work, however *smart*, is much less simplistic and has less “attitude” than fashion dictates. He seems to paint out of suave disgust with the way things are, perhaps with disgust for the pseudo-radical philistine’s antipathy toward painting. Thus I see his work not as an empty,



Jonathan Lasker, *Idiot Savant*, 1983, Oil on canvas, 78" x 60".
Courtesy Massimo Audlello Gallery.

ill-defined “double” for painting, that is, as part of current bourgeois anti-art voodoo, but as a true “treble” to that false “double,” or better—as the German translator of the germinal version of this essay gave it, a couple of years ago (though who, here, could be expected to know about church music)—as a kind of “descant,” gliding up an octave above its given basis.

Lasker’s barky, stucco-like facture, *anaestheticized* as it is, does manage to affirm painting. Baudrillard generalizes with dumbfounding crudity in his remarks on “The Stucco Angel” (welcome to the ’80s), but his slapdash insult to historical truth takes on interest before Lasker’s heavy, stucco-ish impastos. “Stucco exorcises the unlikely confusion of matter into a single new substance, and is prestigious theatrically because [it] is itself a representative [i.e., representational?] substance, a mirror of all the others”¹⁰: here is at least the flavor, let’s say, of Lasker’s kind of significance. But while Baudrillard’s cynicism as to the possibility of sublimating (negligible) matter into (appreciable) immaterial effect conveniently sweeps a great deal of worthy art, old and new, out of the way, in today’s circumstances—including by now even debasements of Baudrillard!—even blasphemous anti-painting has to entail *painting per se* sufficiently to count.



Jonathan Lasker, *Expressive Abstinence*, 1989, Oil on canvas, 120" × 90".
Courtesy Massimo Audlello Gallery.

I keep speaking of Baudrillard, against my will. If only he conveyed a sense that his brutalization of Artaud, whose thought was no delicate bloom, had been *sportif*, we could thank him for cleverly driving us back to the original "double" that got marginalized before "margins" themselves became so *hot*. Certainly the Artaudian double is no coy postmodern tap dance. When, under the heading "An Affective Athleticism," Artaud calls on the actor (read artist) "to make use of his emotions as a wrestler makes use of his muscles," seeing "the human being as a Double, like the Ka of the Egyptian mummies, like a perpetual specter from which the affective powers radiate," he calls for unnervingly vivid affect (not *none*), for "virtues which are not those of an image but carry a material sense."¹¹ Far from implying business as usual, this seems to indicate a toughened, materialized version of dramatic "image." I now find myself dwelling on Artaud, in turn; but he heads me into the special "double," or double-negation of the simplistic, mistaken double, in Lasker's art.

An actor, or artist, should be like a wrestler? What can this mean *right now*, with even *that* debased? You don't have to be a Barthes to see that there is an art world as blaspheming of its own classic equivalent, not only as profiteering, as the world of "pro" wrestling, as I have written elsewhere. If Lasker's appliques of disjunct forms are at all like the shadow puppets or the body-ornamented dancers of Artaud's East Indies (already admired by

Derain, among the Fauves), don't the similar ballet tights with wild arabesque designs of Nijinsky now resurface with Artaudian underclass outrageousness in the figured tights of Ravishing Rick Rude, of the "World Wrestling Federation" (an operation so *purely* commercial that, like Jeff Koons, it simply self-advertises)? Some would see Lasker that way, and enthusiastically; but then, for his double-negation of painting, I see him instead as more like an Arthur Craven, the boxer who rates as a Dadaist, but only because he *really did box*. While I'd hate in effect to hand over Lasker (a loyal Mets fan) to the French, the Artaudian aspect of his work isn't unrelated to the Artauderie of that great anti-painter whose art is very much *real painting*, Dubuffet, either.

Contemporaneous with *The Theater and Its Double*, with its wittily defensive imputation to a painting by Lucas van Leyden of "metaphysical" ideas ("I am sorry to use this word, but it is their name"¹²), was the famous lecture by Heidegger, "The Establishment by Metaphysics of the Modern World Picture" (1938), published as "The Age of the World Picture" (and supplemented in *Holzwege*, 1952). Here the philosopher maintains not that a new, Cartesian world-picture replaced a pre-modern one, but rather that the Cartesian method uniquely effected the very representability of the world as such. This "modern" world-picture being (or having been?) *the* world-picture, the very condition of appearing altogether new "is peculiar to the world that has become picture." The picturability, as such, of the world, Heidegger sees as essentially modern; and the very word "picture" (*bild*) "now means the structured image (*gebild*) that is the creature of man's producing . . ."¹³ The very understanding of its coming into being is tinged by a sense that almost from its first comprehensibility the world-picture would have to dissipate.

Is it rash to find here, half a century later, some inevitable "postmodernity" implicit in modernity itself, or is that a thought only an amateur could get away with? Clearly, Jonathan Lasker dallies with mechanisms of *depiction* already subverted in a century of modern painting: a now almost pointlessly imagic drawing-in-paint; stripes dopily adrift from their mates in a more air-headed than atmospheric field; loose parts from the old Erector Set of perspective. Some of us have been quite happy that the preposterous old picturability has been defunct since 1910, so why pretend we're disappointed? And if we never wanted to "buy into" the puritan postmodernists' interminable funeral for painting, well, we can admire how Lasker manages to concoct representations of our present, not altogether unfortunately unpicturable, condition. "No age lets itself be done away with by a negating decree," says Heidegger, adding—as with so much art today—"Negation only throws the negator off the path."¹⁴ Heidegger also says that "What belongs properly to the essence of the picture is . . . system"; and "Where the world becomes picture, the system . . . comes to dominance," though "where the system is in the ascendancy, the possibility always exists also of its degenerating into the superficiality of a system that has merely been fabricated and pieced together."¹⁵ This integral doubt in the artifice of picturing *at all* seems to me rather like what Lasker negotiates in his art. Lasker's painting is no mere postmodernist documentation of the disenfranchised means and mechanics of representation; neither is it anti-modernist by simple "negating decree."

Here, in the 1952 appendices Heidegger added to his "World Picture" essay, it seems that "the melting down of the self-consummating essence of the modern age," which in context is practically to say of picturability itself, "into the self-evident, is being accomplished." To my eyes, Lasker reflects this condition with a practically Nietzschean hilarity. Nietzschean in its own right is the way, for Heidegger, the collapse has to occur in order for there to be "fertile soil for Being to be in question in an original way"; hence, "Only there where the consummation of the modern age attains the heedlessness [or recklessness (*rücksichtslosigkeit*)] that is its peculiar greatness is future history being prepared."¹⁶

To be sensitive to the tremors in the foundations beneath us is perhaps almost to be condemned to a dandyish exclusivity. If only the crumbling of the world-picture meant simply the final downfall of academicized representation in painting, we could simply cheer. By now, more has been crumbling than representational, or even modernist abstract, art. Lasker's reckless, *rücksichtslosige* images might be said to consist of shards of the modern world-picture, yet he still manages to paint them with a saving delight in painting. Of course, to the new Calvinist radicals, beyond the pale even of so-called "Neo-Geo," so naughty an intimacy with paint almost calls for the pillory and stocks. But in his own way Lasker is as critical as any. In a published statement, he noticeably refrains from prevailing nihilism in explaining that it is painting's very "capacity to present the viewer with both a fictive experience and an actual experience simultaneously" that allows it to "examine the very mechanism of fiction" and the way we invest meaning in its "random graphic marks."¹⁷ Even in its dandyism, Lasker's art is strong on *defence*: it is as if unwilling to "play ball" without putting up a fight.

Despite the risk of a dandyism of *appreciation*, my thoughts on Lasker seem to be spiraling outward. Collins and Milazzo's piquantly crafty suggestion that Lasker's "strife" between figure and ground might be likened to "the social phenomenon of 'class struggle'" calls the attention of irony to art's shared frontier with social life.¹⁸ Somewhere between the large world of the class struggle and the little world of a single painting is the art world, where, as the sociologist Levin Schücking could already write more than four decades ago, "one can become a success only if, following the American device, one 'gets talked about.'" Schücking seems quite relevant to Lasker when he explores the sociology of traditional high-class taste as anti-individualistic and accustomed to thinking in types: "The complete exposure of the life of the emotions, like all that is ruthless in expression, is . . . bound to be unattractive . . . It is always revealing things that must at all costs be suppressed."¹⁹ Lasker, I think, deals with such deep-seated detachment just enough for his willful *anaestheticism* to be manifest as an "isometric" strength. It is the bad-taste part, then, that begins to seem more than dandyish or indulgent, given that upper-class types, conditioned by concern with inheritance, consign art to a decorative place in their scheme of life and tend to be repelled by eccentricity; then again, "Repulsion wears off. Unconscious compromises are made between earlier ideals and that which is constantly seen or heard." In other words, as Schücking quotes Max Liebermann as saying, "Take the picture away, or I shall begin to like it."²⁰



Jonathan Lasker, *Born Yesterday*, 1989, Oil on linen, 77" x 102".
Courtesy Massimo Audiello Gallery.

It is hardly as a mere child of his age that I admire Lasker in his art—certainly not in the sense that "the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light" (Luke 16:8). Yes, Lasker's art is this-worldly instead of "transcendental," but its very wit must be good for the spirit too. "You have as much laughter as you have faith," it has been said. Oscar Wilde? No; Luther.²¹ □

1. Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century* (1952), trans. James Emmons, rev. ed. (New York, 1981), 122.
2. Georges Bataille, *Manet* (1955), trans. Austryn Wainhouse and James Emmons (New York, 1983), 92. Bataille is here addressing "that elegant thinness of the pictorial image, that flat transparency which sounded the death-knell of rhetorical eloquence in painting," *à la* the famous playing-card trope. There is a critical duplicity in his text, however, because by this point the reader has already been coaxed repeatedly to concede that *all* rhetoric or eloquence goes by the boards with Manet: e.g., "Every strain of eloquence, feigned or genuine, is done away with" (48). So in some sense any remark beginning "His eloquence, needless to say, had nothing in common with the turgid . . ." (72) must be bankrupt before the thought is complete. French "postmodern" thought seems shot through with such contradictions.
3. As quoted in Sterling, 123; cf. Bataille, 42.
4. Charles Chassé, *Le Mouvement symboliste dans l'art du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1947), 114.
5. James Laver, "Good Bad Art," *The Studio*, CXXXVI/667 (October 1948). Laver was also fascinated, it happens, by a Victorian propensity to "cement fragments of broken porcelain" all over objects d'art.
6. Vernon Lee, (pseud. of Violet Paget), "Recent Aesthetics," *The Quarterly Review*, CXCIX/398 (April 1904).
7. Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York, 1958), 59; emphases in original.
8. *Ibid.*, 65.
9. *Ibid.*, 61.
10. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. P. Foss, P. Patton, and P. Beitchman (New York, 1983), 88.
11. Artaud, *Theater*, 134–5, for these passages.
12. *Ibid.*, 36.
13. Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in his *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. William Lovitt (New York, 1977), 115–54, here 134, with n. 18 (ed.) on Heidegger's word *gebild*.
14. *Ibid.*, 138.
15. *Ibid.*, 141.
16. *Ibid.*, 153; in the original, Heidegger, *Holzwege*, 4th ed. (Frankfurt am/Main, 1963), 103.
17. Jonathan Lasker, "Nature Study," "Idiot Savant," "Ascension," *Effects: Magazine for New Art Theors*, no. 3 (Winter 1986).
18. Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo, "Tropical Codes," *Kunstforum International*, no. 83 (March–May 1986), 308–37; here, 326.
19. Levin L. Schücking, *The Sociology of Literary Taste* (International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction) (New York, 1945), 63.
20. *Ibid.*, 61.
21. Martin Luther, from a Latin commentary on Psalm 126.

Joseph Masheck's forthcoming book is *Modern Supplies: Art Matters in the Present* (UMI Research Press).