



## TRAVELS IN CONSUMERIST UTOPIA

BARRY BLINDERMAN

*I am interested in desire and consumer happiness. When I started out, I wanted to paint like the artists who did the illustrations for pulp paperbacks—of romance, passion, love....<sup>1</sup> A lot of the things I was reproducing are charged with sexuality. It's like being a troubadour—seducing people, unleashing the libido.<sup>2</sup>*

WALTER ROBINSON'S IMAGERY RUNS THE GAMUT OF OUR APPETITES, and nearly everything he depicts is either for sale or for hire. Gun-toting private eyes embrace wily beauties in distress. Clothing models parade around in their workaday seasonal attire, while nude or scantily clad online amateurs proffer their services in selfies. For other tastes there are adorable kittens or plush toy bunnies just begging to be cuddled, burgers from every imaginable fast-food chain, and an array of medicinals from whiskey to aspirin. Many of these earthly delights are twice-removed from their sources, painted from a reproduction—an advertisement, merchandising circular, or book cover—with a brushy application of acrylic paint as alluring as the products they represent.

Like Monet with his dozens of Rouen Cathedrals, each painted at a different hour or season, or Warhol with his *32 Campbell's Soup Cans*, representing every variety, Robinson is rarely content to capture a subject once. He takes an appropriately serial approach to things that exist only in profusion. His technique is mechanically assisted yet individualistic: in a studio lit only by a projected image on a blank canvas, he works quickly, directly from his ethereal "model" in the most spontaneous fashion, with neither preparatory outlining in pencil nor preliminary sketches. His paintings are unabashedly photo-derived, but with neither the bombastic scale nor the confectionary iciness of work by some of his notable peers.

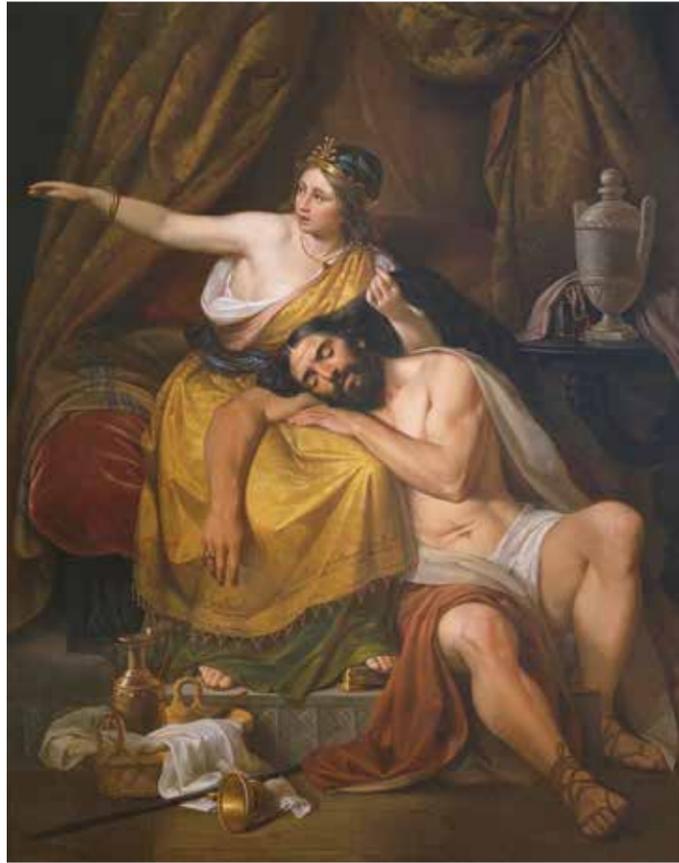
Born in Delaware in 1950 and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Robinson moved to Manhattan in 1968 to pursue a double major in art history and psychology at Columbia University, the very year that institution's anti-war protests led to a campus-wide shutdown. He describes the paintings he did during his student years as "bad Color Field." Encouraged by artist-critic Brian O'Doherty to write about art, he had become by the mid-1970s a reviewer for *Art in America* and co-publisher, with Edit deAk and Joshua Cohn, of *Art-Rite* (1973 to 1978), a quarterly zine with artist-designed covers recently described by critic Lucy Lippard as "populist, political, and cutting edge."<sup>3</sup> In 1978 he tried his hand at experimental film,

co-directing with deAk and Paul Dougherty an unsettling and poetic visual accompaniment to the art-punk group Suicide's minimalist homicidal ballad, "Frankie Teardrop."

As a member of the influential artist collective Collaborative Projects—along with Jane Dickson, Kiki Smith, John Ahearn, Tom Otterness, Robin Winters, Jenny Holzer, and others—Robinson exhibited his earliest "romance" painting, a vampire-Batman ravishing a death-pale blonde [1979, below], at the *Batman Show* held in 1979 at Winters's downtown



Right: *Untitled*, 1979, acrylic on masonite, 16 ½ x 11 ¾," courtesy Robin Winters  
Opposite: *Willie's Girl* (detail), 1982, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 inches



loft, and in 1980 participated in the "raw, raucous, trashy"<sup>4</sup> *Times Square Show*, organized in an abandoned massage parlor on West 41st Street. As Robinson recalled in a 2012 interview, Collaborative Projects, or Colab, "was a group of artists that was actually living a political experience. It was like a commune. Plenty of its members were political radicals, or anarchists. I wasn't so hardcore. I was into collective action, but I think my focus was on romance."<sup>5</sup>

In 1982 Robinson bridged the gap between Colab's democratic inclusivity and a more insular, theory-driven order<sup>6</sup> when he had his first one-person exhibition of modestly scaled paintings on store-bought canvases at the seminal Metro Pictures gallery, whose stated commitment was to art reflecting "concerns emanating from the culture as represented in the popular media."<sup>7</sup> Like fellow Metro Pictures artists Richard Prince, Thomas Lawson, and Jack Goldstein, Robinson appropriated tropes of popular culture as a means of celebrating the emotional

dynamics of images from mass media. Taking lurid cover illustrations and film posters from the 1940s and '50s and re-representing them in a style culled from "how-to-paint" books, he was playing upon painting's dual role as commercial enterprise and intimate act. Art critic Carlo McCormick noted that he imbued his work with a "devious sense of irony done with incredible sincerity."<sup>8</sup>

*I hoped that the use of a readable illustration style, obviously taken from commercial art sources, would on the one hand help the art function as a market commodity, and on the other, by sidestepping the need for a personal, original style, focus attention away from formalist issues and onto questions of content.*<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to the cool detachment characteristic of more orthodox image scavengers like Prince and David Salle, Robinson's work evinces an undeniable romanticism: his square-jawed hero types and swooning seductresses easily transcend their clichéd origins and penetrate the psyche as archetypal figures. *Willie's Girl* (1982, p. 22), a four-by-three-foot painting exhibited in his first Metro Pictures exhibition, exemplifies the "questions of content" resulting from Robinson's choice to copy a particular black and white photo given to him by a friend—ostensibly an obscure 1950s movie still or setup for a paperback book illustration—and how his transformative strategies unlock the art historical and mythic potential encoded in such a found image. Here, a blonde *femme fatale* in a rose-colored dress and purple tights sips her drink wistfully in the company of a red-haired man who has passed out drunk at a casino table. Man, woman, and roulette wheel are conjoined in a triangular configuration portending deception at the least (a slipped Mickey, perhaps) or, given the genre, even murder. Borrowed from a banal romance-crime depiction reminiscent of mid-twentieth century film noir—think of Rick's rigged roulette wheel in *Casablanca*—Robinson's painting recalls portrayals of seduction and guile in both secular and religious paintings of the Baroque era and beyond: from the foppish young man getting his ring filched by the rosy-cheeked palm reader in Caravaggio's *Fortune Teller*, 1594, to the drunk Samson getting a fateful haircut from Delilah, one of the original *femmes fatales*, in *Samson and Delilah* by José Salomé Pina (1851, above left). In fact, *Samson and Delilah* has the same three-pointed configuration of woman, sleeping man, and oval "wheel of fortune" device as *Willie's Girl*, with the basket containing the wine—like the roulette wheel and liquor glass in Robinson's painting—serving as the third point in the triangle. With a few costume and décor changes plus a generous haircut, it could almost pass for a pulp novel cover. In resuscitating a mode of illustration that was never taken seriously as

art, Robinson contemporizes the layers of style and content reverberating from the distant to the recent past.

For a work by an artist who flaunted his alliance with amateur painters through an abnegation of originality and embrace of commercial illustration, *Willie's Girl* is masterfully painted, with an economy of brushstroke reminiscent of John Singer Sargent's late watercolors. The light blue outlines on the woman's face, shoulders and arm, mimicking the bluish cast of her glass, instill in her the subtlest otherworldly glow. The intricate cross-hatching of green, blue, orange and gray articulating the weave of the comatose man's jacket abuts an expanse of unpainted canvas in the lower right corner of the painting, which, in concert with the flatly rendered dress and abstraction of the purple curtain and ochre wall, ironically reveals the fulfillment of Robinson's earlier aspirations to be a Color Field painter. Squint, look past the facial features, and you've got a shorthand version of a Helen Frankenthaler color-stain painting.

*Since the work was all about desire, I thought I'd do paintings about the things I really want, that I really need, really use. Whenever I had a headache, I'd really want an Excedrin, and I wanted to put that in a painting. I figured that I would borrow the pharmaceutical companies' market research. If it worked for them it would work for me.*<sup>10</sup>

By the mid-1980s, Robinson's painting style had matured, incorporating painterly flourishes that pastiched the Abstract Expressionists' sacrosanct personal touch. He had also strayed beyond the strict borders of appropriation by painting from his own photographs, while broadening his sphere of subjects to include portraits, Morandi-like arrangements of beer cans and bottles, and monolithic over-the-counter pharmaceuticals and toiletries from Excedrin to Tampax, with allusive titles like *Painkillers* and *Woman III* (1984, p. 34). His second exhibition at Metro Pictures, shared with Thomas Lawson in 1984, comprised ten relatively large-scale paintings of Johnson & Johnson Baby Oil, Vicks VapoRub, Bromo Seltzer, Excedrin, Tampax, Vaseline Intensive Care, vinegar, a bowl of sugar cubes, and two Goya honey jars. These were iconic "portraits" of products, done from photographs he shot head-on in his studio. In the artist's words, "the idea was to revive the still life by remaking it as an object of desire—putting back the content that modernism [expunged] when it transformed the emblematic Dutch still life into a formalist exercise."<sup>11</sup>

The fluidity of the painted surface in each work in this series, enhanced through glazing and use of a spray bottle of water, activates the liquid contents, or associations, of his subjects so that, in effect, painting and product become one. Beyond their obvious Pop-consumerist

derivation, these paintings are arguably more personal in their expression of sexual desire and heartbreak than Robinson's earlier romance paintings. There is a wistfulness not seen in Warhol, Wayne Thiebaud, and other purveyors of consumable products frequently cited as Robinson's influences. Raised to a near-human scale, the suggestively titled *Oil* (1984, p. 38) and *Lotion* (1984, p. 35) stand like solitary figures offering their body-and-soul-soothing emollients, while the meaning of *Chest Pain* (1984, p. 32), a side-by-side arrangement of Excedrin and Vicks VapoRub on a shelf, could hardly be lost on anyone who's been in love.

Around the time he was making the product paintings, Robinson became a leading chronicler of the East Village art scene, not only as the art editor of the *East Village Eye* from 1983 through 1985, but also in his unposed, loosely rendered yet spot-on portrayals of nearly two dozen art world luminaries, including gallerists Annie Herron and Doug Milford, writers Joseph Masheck and Carlo McCormick, filmmaker Tessa Hughes-Freeland, and artists Martin Wong, Ellen Berkenblit, Richard Hambleton, and Mike Bidlo. A haze of smoke, harsh flash, and booze pervades these paintings, as most of the snapshots they are based on were taken at crowded art gallery openings or after-parties at nightclubs like 8BC, Kamikaze, and Danceteria. None of those portrayed appears happy to have been photographed, and the artist himself looks disaffected in *Self-Portrait* (1984, p. 62), with the turbulent folds in his dark blue coat and acrid yellow facial accents contributing to a sense of malaise. Robinson's jarringly expressionistic *Bidlo* (1984, p. 66) is the only portrait with an obvious art historical reference. Here, the consummate image pirate, wearing shades and a leather jacket, strikes up a finger-to-the-mouth gesture closely emulating Warhol's pose in his most well-known self-portrait series. As in the rest of the portraits, Robinson worked from his own photo, but it is clear from this brilliantly hued painting that appropriation, although abandoned for the moment, was not far from his mind. Nor was commodification—all artists are, after all, pitching a product to a consumer demographic, however indifferent or receptive an audience may be to one's particular brand.

That said, it was inevitable that a contrarian like Robinson would again distance himself from fellow painter-critic Thomas Lawson's pronouncement of "the impossibility of passion in a culture that has institutionalized self-expression."<sup>12</sup> Between 1983 and 1984 Robinson painted a heartwarming series of head-and-shoulder portraits of the two-year-old Antonia Smith Robinson, followed in 1985 by single portraits of her dolls and plush animals (pp. 58–60). In opposition to the critical view that all emotional gestures are mere reverberations

Above: José Salomé Pina, *Samson and Delilah*, 1851, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico

of those seen in movies and on TV, Robinson chose to portray a subject whose authenticity was putatively unassailable: his love for his daughter, and in turn, her affection for her stuffed animals and dolls. Few, if any, contemporary artists have better captured the spontaneity, the quicksilver changes in expression of a little child, as seen in *Untitled (Antonia with Spoon)* [1983, p. 57] or *Untitled (Antonia with Red Lips)* [1984, p. 55].

Shown with the intimate paintings of dolls and toys in his 1985 exhibition at Piezo Electric was a series of tall, thin canvases with way-over-lifesize closeups of couples embracing [1985, pp. 73-77]. As they were cropped to reveal just faces and little more, if you didn't know their source, you'd never know they were all derived from pornographic magazine photographs. Paired with these were identically sized paintings of trees photographed from below, each representing a different season. The implication is of a dizzying bliss—sex outdoors under the trees, "... that idea of mad love *l'amour fou* that drives one to abandon everything else in pursuit of the object of desire...."<sup>13</sup>

*I wanted to make abstract paintings but I didn't know what kind of abstract paintings to make, so I got a machine to do it.*<sup>14</sup>

Robinson felt inspired after seeing a Gerhard Richter exhibition in 1985 featuring both figurative and abstract paintings, and decided to try something new. He'd had a hankering from his student days to be an abstract painter, while fully acknowledging the difficulty, if not impossibility, of making new abstract art. Embracing chance and this time eschewing the artist's personal touch, he appropriated an old fairground novelty—spin art—by clamping three-foot square canvases to a homemade motorized platform and pouring or dripping onto these sign painter's enamel in various colors. He soon realized that the amount of technical skill required for this endeavor went far beyond his reliance on the centrifugal force of the machine, and so, inadvertently, came up with his most original compositions. Besides the more predictable targets and symmetrical splatters, he tried pouring rings of black latex paint onto his usual oil-based enamel, resulting in a "rose window" effect, or poured turpentine over an earlier failed attempt to achieve a "stain pastel." In others, he found ways to create asymmetrical patterns, or compose with a host of different colors without muddying the canvases.

Holland Cotter remarked of this series: "The kaleidoscopic splatter paintings that resulted burlesqued two kinds of American art at once—on the one hand, 'action painting' with its mystique of the organic individual touch; on the other the hippy aesthetic of the '60s, with its democratic blurring of art and craft and its mandala-obsessed acid-head spirituality—an



odd, logical extension, it may now be seen, of the '50s Sublime."<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Robinson's use of a machine as an attempt to avoid aesthetic decision-making bears the residue of Marcel Duchamp's experimental *Rotary Demisphere* of 1920 and Jean Tingely's *Métamatic* art-producing machines from the 1950s. For that matter, Robinson's use of overhead projectors, slide projectors, and, most recently, digital projectors on everything but the spin art series is essentially just another type of technological assistance. The spin paintings, created over a period of three years, anticipate Roxy Paine's considerably more automated *Paint Dipper* machines, not to mention Damien Hirst's slick and overblown spin tondos, by a decade.

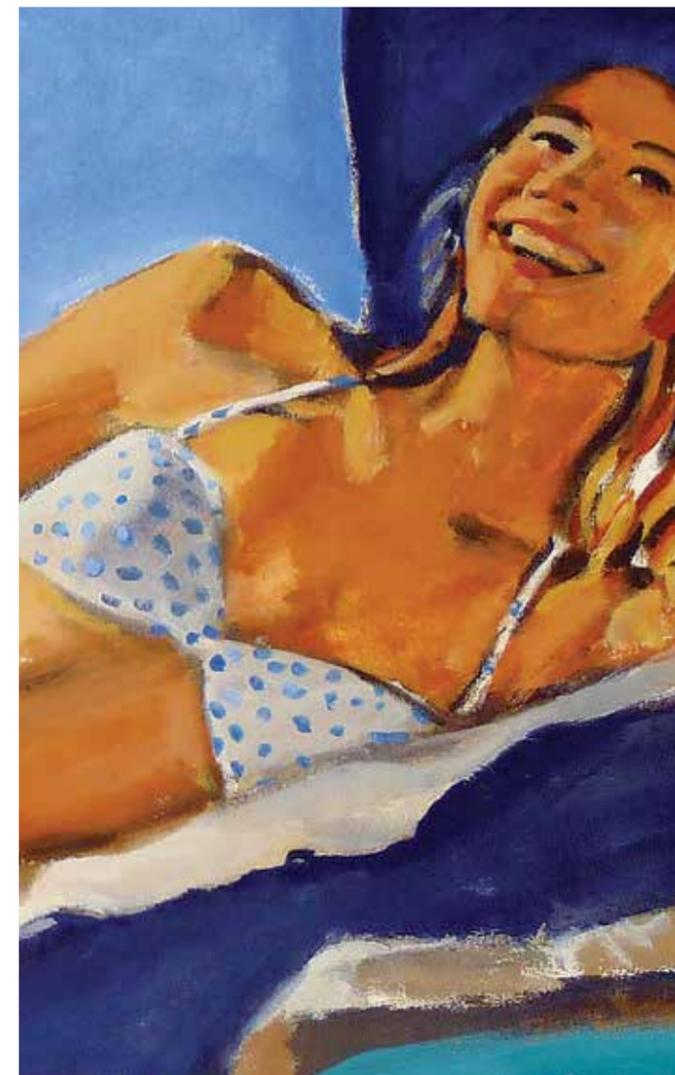
Whereas Robinson's pulp romance paintings' titles were generally borrowed from the titles of the paperbacks whose cover illustrations he copied, the titles of all hundred or so spin paintings (e.g., *Unanchored* [1987, above] or *The Heat of the Climate* [1986, p. 86]) were appropriated from a single source—a translation of Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*. Was it perhaps the book's themes of love, deception, jealousy, and war that appealed to an artist who had made his reputation on paintings of gamblers, detectives, and disarming women? Or a reference to the Stendhal Syndrome—dizziness, palpitations, even hallucinations induced

Above: *Unanchored*, 1987, enamel on canvas, 36 x 36"

by viewing art—which certainly could be the case for viewers of these vertiginous paintings?

*For many years I spent most of my time in front of a computer writing. Now I spend my time in front of an easel. It's so much better.*<sup>16</sup>

Though Robinson's output of paintings was sparse between 1988 and 2007—due in part to his hire in 1996 as editor-in-chief of *Artnet Magazine*, the earliest and foremost online-only art journal—the 1990s brought the first series of food paintings: muted still lifes taken from an



Above: *Lands' End Odalisque* (detail), 2014, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 58"

assortment of frozen dinner package photos. The artist's treatment of these most banal subjects took great liberty with all but the basic outlines. Both the tipped-forward plates and the abstracted, blue-outlined noodles and hunks of beef in *Romanoff Supreme* and *Meatball Dumpling Stew* [both 1994, p. 100] point to Cézanne's plates of fruit and his late, sketchy paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire. Or turn them on their sides, and the dishes and their contents look like the ovals prevalent in analytical cubism. Like the earlier pharmaceutical paintings, these works seem introspective, even self-referential: lean times in the 1990s called for Lean Cuisine, the most instant, bland repast.

Two events led to Robinson's return to painting full-time. The first was an exhibition of his 1980s romance paintings at Metro Pictures in 2008, with the resulting sales allowing the rental of a large studio in Long Island City. The second was the folding of *Artnet*, thus freeing him from an office job. Since that time, Robinson has revisited and expanded upon three bodies of work: fast food and other consumables (like liquor, cigarettes and pain relievers), porn, and pulp romance. Plus, as of 2013 he has begun exploring a new genre—fashion. But not high fashion, *haute couture*, or any kind of dress that signals advanced style or sophistication. Rather, he has turned his attention to what is now known as "normcore," the "workaday clothing designed for the neat and clean American middle class."<sup>17</sup>

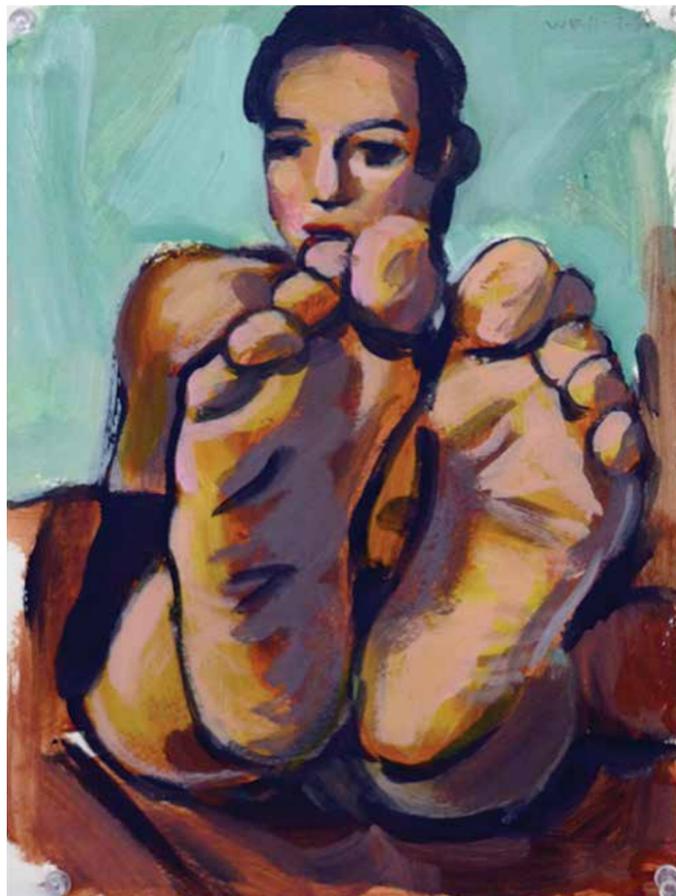
*That kind of [fashion] imagery is so ordinary, so unremarkable, it's everywhere—the exact opposite of the avant-garde. At the same time, like the avant-garde, it's an idiom all its own, with its own unique characteristics that are both historical and transitory .... The pulp images I exhibited back in the 80s came from what I thought was a lost and discarded image bank, and this kind of low-end fashion stuff is a similar subject, a "collection" that is so boring as to be almost invisible ....<sup>18</sup> The models are saying, "I'm happy, aren't you?" They are selling dresses or suits, and they are also selling the capitalist consumerist utopia. You can have it all. It's a kind of idealism that the avant-garde abandoned a hundred years ago.<sup>19</sup>*

With the fashion paintings Robinson introduces a new twist to the venerable portrait genre. In the typical economic dynamic, a patron hires an artist to paint a portrait. Here, the artist stands to one side, allowing an anonymous corporate marketing department to determine the dress and pose of the subject, a professional model. These models all have the same exaggerated toothy smiles—a step away from the hysterical—as if they can barely contain their elation as advocates for consumerism. As the artist notes, there is a distinct connection between the fashion paintings and his pulp romance paintings of the 1980s, as well as to Richard

Prince's earliest appropriations of magazine advertisements featuring models, wristwatches, and jewelry.

In *Land's End Odalisque* [2014, p. 111, detail p. 27], Robinson discovers the pose of one of J.-A.-D. Ingres' concubines in a Polyanna-faced model lying on chaise lounge, wearing a sunbonnet and two-piece. The central focus of the composition is the mesmerizing white-on-blue polka dot pattern on the bottom of her retro swimsuit, which is reversed on the bikini top. The simplified articulation of sky, water, and a patch of greenery provides an elegant counterpoint to the deep blue hat and towel.

In two eye-boggling color variations of the same painting—*Sun, Sand, and On Sale* and *Sun, Surf, and Style: the Swim Tee, Ride the Wave* [both 2014, pp. 116-117]—Robinson mixes stripes with polka dots on a model posing against a brilliant field of color in a provocative *contrapposto*, her face cropped to the tip of her nose. Radiant, color-matched patterns



point us toward what Robinson terms a "capitalist consumerist utopia." The three butterflies he reproduced from the ad, fortuitously alluding to Damien Hirst's butterfly wing "paintings," could be a poke at the Brit for his grand-scale co-option of Robinson's spin art paintings.

In *Lavender Shadow Plaid* [2014, p. 49] and *Long Sleeve Plaid* [2014, p. 114], paintings of single folded plaid shirts situated against fairly blank backgrounds, the patterns' resemblance to modernist abstraction is a given, but the analogy between clothing and painting runs deeper: just as a shirt on display is folded around a cardboard insert and pinned to keep its shape, canvas, a woven fabric, is folded around a wooden stretcher and stapled for support. Further, as in the spin paintings, there is a Duchampian overtone. Fascinated by parallel notions of display in art and advertising, Duchamp actually appropriated his term "readymade" from "ready-made," the turn of the century name for ready-to-wear (manufactured) apparel. The latent meaning in Robinson's paintings of shirts, boots and shoes is that paintings are commodities, however rarefied, either purchased in stores (galleries) or more often these days ordered from online catalogues (auction houses or gallery websites). Their styles too are seasonal, with even "spring" and "fall" sales.

*The paintings based on ads from Backpage, where young women offer 'body rubs' or services as 'escorts,' also have their own language, which has developed indigenously, so to speak. It's a language of solicitation, and one of uncertain legality<sup>20</sup>.... I like the idea that these paintings engage the viewer in a real psychosexual dynamic, a kind of call and response, a circular exchange.<sup>21</sup>*

Still another type of economic transaction lies behind the Backpage selfies that Robinson has painted since 2010, some of which, like *Selfie II* [2013, detail opposite], are mirror shots preceding the high-resolution front-facing cell camera. In these novel works—with which Robinson has introduced the latest manifestation of self-portraiture, the selfie, into the canon of painting—the marketing middleman is eliminated, and all the poses and resulting instant photographs have been dictated and distributed by the model alone. Whether purchasing or "just looking" at one of these works, we are implicated in "a circular exchange," confronting dead-on a representation of a taboo that is one click away from just about any site on the Internet.

In *Giantess (Blue Mock Turtleneck)* [2014, p. 82], one of the artist's most lascivious paintings, the model has lifted her dress to expose her pudenda, her severely foreshortened body seen from below as if to render the viewer/voyeur beneath her powerless. The parenthetical

Left: *Nude*, 2011, acrylic on paper, 12 x 9"



fashion reference in the title reinforces the observation that in Robinson's work, one genre slips easily into another; in some cases it is difficult to distinguish an innocent portrait or lingerie ad painting from a porn-derived work. In *Nude* [2011, opposite], an even more extremely foreshortened figure, her outstretched feet all but concealing the rest of her body, calls to mind the similarly posed seminude figure of Andrea Mantegna's *Dead Christ*, c. 1490, thus facilitating the most pious association ever applied to an ad appealing to foot fetishists.

*Why is a cheeseburger interesting? For me it's all about desire, and all about authenticity, but I also realize that art is an empty vessel that we fill with meaning.<sup>22</sup>*

Nearly as seductive as his pornography-based work, Robinson's food paintings of the past several years are all of the salty or sweet variety—either fast food or pastries, donuts, and cakes—acknowledging our voluntary ensnarement in a web of consumerist instant gratification,

Above: *Selfie II* (detail), 2013, acrylic on paper, 12 x 9"

Right: Still from Carl's Jr. Charlotte McKinney All-Natural "Too Hot For TV" commercial

TBHQ and other toxic additives notwithstanding. And, of course, as in fashion magazine covers, the food advertisements that Robinson copies have already been Photoshopped to bring out a hyperreal freshness and mouthwatering appeal. His dozens of portrayals of hamburgers, whether Whoppers, Big Macs, or even Amy's California Veggie Burgers, feed into America's obsession with that "You deserve a break today," "Have it your way" fast-food promise. However, as we've entered an era of "BK Super Seven Incher" burger ads that will "Blow Your Mind Away," or Carl's Jr.'s notoriously carnal ads in which beautiful models attempt to shove super-sized burgers into their mouths [below], Robinson's lushly painted burgers seem comparatively tender and demure.

Humorous takes on modernist art abound in the food paintings, ranging from one-liners like *Impression: Cheeseburger's* [2012, p. 103] play on Monet, to *Cinnamon Roll (Spiral Jetty)'s* [2013, p. 108] "commodification" of Robert Smithson's landmark earthwork. Of particular note is a multilayered reference to Jasper Johns, in *Savarin* [2013, 105], a starkly portrayed container of McDonald's french fries missing only the corporate logo. The well-known Johns sculpture to which its title refers, *Painted Bronze*, 1960, is a meticulously hand-painted bronze sculpture of a Savarin coffee can containing over a dozen paintbrushes soaking in turpentine. Given the barrage of associations set in motion by Robinson's observation of similitude—a french fry to be dipped in ketchup like a brush dipped in paint, for one—it appears that the younger artist has, with tongue in cheek, heeded the master image-borrower's suggestion to "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it."<sup>23</sup> Incidentally, Robinson had at least indirectly alluded to Johns's other 1960 *Painted Bronze* sculpture, of two Ballantine cans, in his earlier paintings of beer cans such as *Three Beers* [1987, p. 40].



*I took the photo she handed me and looked at it .... It was Hallie, for sure, and she looked even better than in the painting; not that any painting or picture could do her justice. The photograph was in black and white, but even that way I could recognize her violet eyes and the perfect, bright-red lips.*

—Richard S. Prather, *Bodies in Bedlam*, 1951

Bringing us full-circle from the earlier analysis of *Willie's Girl* is *Picture Perfect Kill* [2012, p. 21, detail below], a self-referential artwork for Robinson, in that its subject replicates the artist's long-term strategy of hunting down the "perfect" photograph for each of his "pictures." This broadly brushed four-by-four-foot painting, lifted directly from the cover illustration for a 1951 pulp murder-mystery entitled *Bodies in Bedlam*, depicts a detective studying a nude pinup photo, his polished wingtips resting on the footboard of a bed occupied by a voluptuous blonde. It's a classic Baroque composition, with interlocking diagonals forming an "X," the foreshortened male figure pushed right up to the picture plane, his face concealed in *profil perdu*, and the woman's diaphanous negligee framed by a flowing expanse of scarlet cloth. Flip Robinson's barely robed starlet horizontally and you get an updated version of Édouard Manet's once-scandalous *Olympia*, 1863, with bleached-out middle tones, in-your-face stare, open shoes and all.

An early precedent for Robinson's representation of a nude photo within a painting is Manet's *Portrait of Émile Zola*, [1868, right], which contains a reproduction of the artist's own *Olympia* fastened to a board on the wall behind Zola's desk. And, curiously enough, Mouret, the impresario in Zola's 1883 novel *Au bonheur des dames*, set amidst the rise of the department store in mid-nineteenth-century Paris, is a womanizer who "displays fabrics and colors that would not only entice the female customer but arouse in her 'new bodily desires.'"<sup>24</sup>



*It would be good if whenever you saw a person wearing a polka-dot dress or a striped shirt, you'd think of me and my paintings. It's the essence of capitalism. Take something that belongs to everybody and claim it as your private property. But I also want to transform everything ordinary in the world, all those dots and stripes, into signs of a universal utopian desire.*<sup>25</sup>

For over thirty-five years, Walter Robinson's prodigious output of visually striking paintings with equally potent conceptual underpinnings has asserted itself modestly amidst the cacophony of neo-expressionist, deconstructionist, post-abstract, post-studio, and institutional-critiquing art. Robinson's transformative plundering of nineteenth-century art and literature, 1950s and 60s modernism and pulp illustration, and the contemporary marketplace serve as signposts for navigating the productive conflicts of our consumerist utopia.

Above: Édouard Manet, *Portrait of Émile Zola*, 1868, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Left: *Picture Perfect Kill* (detail), 2012, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48"

## NOTES

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes in italics are by Walter Robinson. I am indebted to Joe Amato for his advice and editing, and to Kendra Paitz for her eagle eye and encouragement.

1. Walter Robinson, *Artist's Talk*, presented at University Galleries of Illinois State University, Normal, October 17, 2014.

2. Walter Robinson, interview by Noelle Bodick, *Artist-Critic Walter Robinson on Painting Desire in a Been-There, Done-That Age*, Artspace Magazine, June 26, 2014.

3. Andrew Russeth, "Art Net: The Life and Times of Walter Robinson," *Observer*, January 2012, <http://observer.com/2012/01/art-net-the-life-and-times-of-walter-robinson-01242012/>.

4. Jeffrey Deitch, "Report from Times Square," *Art in America*, (September 1980).

5. Walter Robinson, interview by Shawna Cooper and Karli Wurzelbacher, *Times Square Show Revisited*, Hunter College Art Galleries, New York, April 6, 2012. <http://www.timessquareshowrevisited.com/accounts/walter-robinson.html>.

6. In the late 1970s and early 1980s works by French post-structuralists Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, and others were translated by American scholars and began flooding university art departments, quickly finding their way into articles by critics and art gallery press releases. The incorporation of purloined photographs from newspapers, magazines, and film by the so-called "Pictures" artists was viewed by critic Douglas Crimp as, "uncovering the strata of representation...of structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture." See Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," in B. Wallis and M. Tucker, eds., *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: David R. Godine, 1992), 177.

7. Helene Winer, "Metro Pictures," in *For Love and Money: Dealers Choose* (New York: Pratt Manhattan Center Gallery, 1981).

8. Russeth, "The Life and Times."

9. Walter Robinson, artist statement for *The Parodic Power of Popular Imagery* exhibition, Freedman Gallery, Albright College, Reading, Pennsylvania, 1985.

10. Robinson, *Artist's Talk*.

11. Walter Robinson, email message to author, September 12, 2014.

12. Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting" *Artforum*, (October 1981).

13. Johanna Drucker, "Mad Love/Puppy Love," in *Mad Love*, (Aarken, Denmark: Aarken Museum of Modern Art, 2007).

14. Robinson, *Artist's Talk*.

15. Holland Cotter, "Charles Clough, Jack Goldstein, Walter Robinson," *Tema Celeste* (October–December 1989).

16. Robinson, *Artist's Talk*.

17. Walter Robinson, email message to author, July 8, 2015.

18. Robinson, interview by Noelle Bodick.

19. Robinson, email, July 8, 2015.

20. Walter Robinson, interview by Rachel Cole Dalamangas, *Interview: Walter Robinson*, zingmagazine, May 15, 2013.

21. Robinson, email, July 8, 2015.

22. Robinson, interview by Rachel Cole Dalamangas.

23. Jasper Johns, "Sketchbook Notes," *Art and Literature* 4 (Spring 1965): 192.

24. Roger A. Salerno, *Landscapes of Abandonment: Capitalism, Modernity, and Estrangement*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003): 206.

25. Robinson, interview by Noelle Bodick. (Note: Robinson added the last sentence, beginning "But I also want..." in an email to me on July 8, 2015.)