

Dennis Kardon

Only The Real

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“There is no longer anything fantastic: there is only the real,” wrote Andre Breton exactly 100 years ago, in Paris, in his 1924 Manifesto of Surrealism. Stirring words, very challenging, but is such extravagant nonsense of any use today? Was Breton already imagining a world of deep fakes and AI chatbots? Google’s own “AI overview” says Breton’s much-quoted boast “essentially means that the most remarkable and beautiful aspects of life are found in the everyday reality, not in fantastical or imaginary realms.” Well that’s boring. Both Sigmund Freud -- basically the avatar of Surrealism, even if he thought Breton was a “crank” and the avant-garde art of his day “abominable” - and my longtime friend and fellow figurative painter Dennis Kardon, the true subject of this text, find the meaning of things right down home in the warm, all-too-cuddly embrace of the nuclear family.

Breton defined Surrealism as a belief in “the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought.” Automatism and the dream were of course Surrealism’s practical techniques in the visual arts, and still familiar today. Robert Motherwell, like Breton a theorist for his own generation, the Abstract Expressionists, frequently put automatism to use, perhaps most famously for his 1965 “Lyric Suite” series of ink-on-paper works. He described the program thus: “paint 1000 sheets without interruption, without a priori traditional or moral prejudices or a posteriori ones, without iconography, and above all without revisions or additions upon critical reflection and judgment.” Motherwell never made it to 1,000; it seems right his poetic trance was broken the practical, very real news of David Smith’s death.

How much “psychic automatism” or more familiarly, doodling, as Motherwell also called it, really exists as a pure manifestation of a psychic reality, or whether anyone can tell the difference, seems dubious in our thoroughly analyzed era. Later, Motherwell told David Sylvester that he considered a brand new unpainted canvas to be so beautiful in itself that he had to “dirty” it to begin to paint.

The “dirty” was George Bataille’s branch of Surrealism, and it was only getting started.

Kardon tells me that for him the blank canvas represents possibility, probabilities that seem infinite when young and narrowing as we age, so that “beginning a painting is trying to animate those possibilities while coming to grips with the reality of who you are.” Kardon is a painter whose imagery arises not from models or pictorial sources but rather as a process of painting itself. As his New York champion, the young artist Kevin Tobin, recently wrote in connection with a survey of Kardon’s paintings he organized titled “Transgressions,” “Kardon never renders or draws anything—the images are economically and spontaneously formed entirely through brushstrokes and the innumerable ways of applying and removing paint with a palette knife.”

With the guidance of Kardon’s perverse imagination, allow me to add. “Perversion was implicit in modern art from the beginning,” the critic Donald Kuspit wrote in 2002, “and remains a vital factor in it today. In fact, one can regard modern art as by and large the history of the representation of perversion.” As examples Kuspit cites Manet’s Olympia (1863) and Picasso’s Demoiselles (1907), certainly two avant-garde touchstones. While not taking offense at being labeled as perverse, Kardon claims that painting (and art in general) has gotten so conventional that he only appears perverse by comparison, even though he’s “just trying to chart a course out of the morass of safe thinking.” If I might return to Breton’s Manifesto briefly, it’s amusing to note that Breton dropped his famous maxim about the real and the imaginary as a mere footnote to a passage from *The Monk* by Matthew Gregory Lewis, the scandalous Gothic tale published 130 years earlier, which complicated the Oedipal drama by having the monk Ambrosio murder (accidentally of course) his mother and rape his sister. Then he murdered her as well.

If we finally turn to the paintings in the current exhibition, we see no murder - yet - but may take

some alarm at, what, the blandishments of the mother? Or perhaps the erotic contrivances of the child? Does masquerading as a mouse bring one closer to that obscure object of desire? Is the father sufficiently distracted by his ice cream? And that glass monkey, if that's what it is, does it symbolize lust? Or maybe good luck? Just remember, if you're not against interpretation, kink feigns innocence. Or, to quote Alicia Vikander's character in the 2022 HBO series *Irma Vep*, "Crossing the line is what gets people off."

More broadly, as long as we're in the realm of extravagant claims, Kardon is like Manet, whose spontaneous painterliness perfectly captures the way his subjects adorn themselves within social convention and cultural myth as they make it new and cast it off. Olympia takes the pose of Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, yet she's not a voluptuary for masculine pleasure but rather a prostitute who commands her client. She marks the end of the female figure as pinup. In *Olympia*, the woman has become the master of sexuality. Indeed, for an art of perversion, Kardon's is notably shy of pinups, though his paint handling is improvisational, rich and luxurious like in Titian. Hothouse love of the family is done on the therapists couch.

But look at the pictures: paint gently massaged into emotional life, a pictorial embodiment of instinct under control, id and superego, that is a sign of being human, physical and spiritual. These strange paintings throb with psychic energy, which "flows from the artist's total humanity, from his meditation on man and woman no less than from his struggle with art," to quote Leo Steinberg in *The Philosophical Brothel*. Unlike Picasso's *demoiselles*, who are savage nature creatures who predate civilization, Kardon's figures are thoroughly domesticated, muffled in candy-colored Bonnard-like interiors, actors in a theater of their own blissful confusion.

Traditional painting was planned, thought out and carefully constructed, nothing left to chance. Barnett Newman described himself as "an

intuitive painter, a direct painter. I have never worked from sketches, never planned a painting, never 'thought out' a painting. I start each painting as if I had never painted before." This method claims an identity of autonomy and invention, anxiety and emotional agitation. It is painting as an instrument of personal psychology and collective psychology, mired in its own history and claiming the instant of this very moment. Some time ago, Dennis had told me his aspiration, but I had forgotten, so I asked him again, and he texted back "I think you quoted me saying that I wanted my work to somehow convey what it felt like to be alive."

—Walter Robinson New York October 2024

#### Artwork Details

Dennis Kardon  
*Bundary Riddle*, 2004  
Oil on linen  
130 × 120 cm / 51 1/4 × 47 1/2 inches

Dennis Kardon  
*Living With Unintended Consequences*, 2004  
Oil on linen  
152 × 142 cm / 60 × 56 inches

Dennis Kardon  
*Taboo Worship*, 2009  
Oil on linen  
91 × 76 cm / 36 × 30 inches

**Dennis Kardon** was born in Des Moines, Iowa, attended Yale College, and came to New York City in the early 1970s. He has exhibited at the Jewish Museum in New York, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and elsewhere, most recently at Massimo De Carlo Gallery in London in 2022 and at *Lubov* in New York earlier this year. His writing has appeared in *Art in America*, the *Brooklyn Rail* and *Artforum*. His studio is in Brooklyn.

**Walter Robinson** is a New York painter and art critic. He recently exhibited with *Air de Paris*, *Galerie Bertrand* in Geneva, *Jeffrey Deitch*, and

Charlie James in Los Angeles, among others. As an art writer, Robinson was founding editor of Artnet Magazine (1996-2012) and of Art-Rite (1973-1977), and also wrote on art for Art in America, Artspace.com, the East Village Eye and the Observer.