

any other. An artist such as the enormously successful John Currin can proclaim that his art is directly descended from Cranach the Elder and a raunchy comic in the *Mad* magazine tradition. “Transcendence and stupidity, formal perfection and kitsch: It’s all just part of the same big expensive banquet,” Perl observes. Whatever floats your boat.

Of course, nobody woke up last fall to be shocked to see fast money thrown at flash-in-the-pan art. The what-the-heck attitude of the moment has its roots in the early 1960s. But the difference between garbage then and garbage now is that works of pop art and other “bad paintings” were ironic. “They depended on the existence of a standard that was being mocked,” Perl says. Laissez-faire painting mocks nothing; irony is too much of an idea for it.

A case in point is this season’s star, Lisa Yuskavage, whose “lesbo-bimbo” figure paintings of comically endowed nude women recall Jessica Rabbit in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. They seem like a joke—only they aren’t.

Forty years ago, the “evil prophet of the profit motive” was Andy Warhol, according to Perl. Warhol launched the trend toward laissez-faire taste that is currently embodied by an artist who does collages incorporating his own semen. A business model has come to drive the art world, Perl says, and the arts community must anoint a new artist to top Warhol, to trump the

EXCERPT

The Dead Letter

Cell phones and e-mail have taken the correspondence process one step closer to extinction. Time zones melt. Gone are the leisurely pace, the ruminative voice, the intervening hiatus, the long-anticipated answer.

—JUDITH KITCHEN, writer, poet, and teacher, in *The Georgia Review* (Fall–Winter, 2006)

latest show at the Modern every season, no matter what.

In mixing medieval manuscripts and Bob Dylan, the Morgan curators fail to recognize that high culture and popular culture are so wonderfully different that they cannot be put together, Perl writes. “Laissez-faire aesthetics is the aesthetics that violates the very principle of art, because it insists that anything goes when in fact the only thing that is truly unacceptable in the visual arts is the idea that anything goes.”

ARTS & LETTERS

Manet’s
Snapshots

THE SOURCE: “The Lost Photographs of Edouard Manet” by Alexi Worth, in *Art in America*, Jan. 2007.

EDOUARD MANET (1832–83), arguably the greatest painter of his era, left behind paintings with some odd elements: In his 1864 *The Dead Christ and the Angels*, for example, the dazzling light on

Christ’s figure shines upward from near the painter’s feet, illuminating the legs and torso and leaving the Savior’s head and shoulders in near darkness. It’s hard to imagine a natural source of such illumination. Alexi Worth, a painter and writer based in Brooklyn, wonders whether Manet’s paintings may be based on photographs.

It’s commonplace for painters to make use of photographs today, but when Manet was working in the early 1860s, it was scandalous. Painters were being “outed” for relying on the crutch of the camera. Little wonder, then, that no photographs have been found among Manet’s papers. Nonetheless, the new technology was sweeping Europe. One of Manet’s closest friends was Nadar (1820–1910), among the first photographers to experiment with artificial light. Bright light looks ordinary to the modern eye, but in the 19th century it was startling. The few artificial sources of bright light available, such as arc lamps, were highly volatile, erratic, and dangerous. The intense light certainly could not have been sustained while a painter laboriously worked from live models.

Manet illuminated *The Dead Christ* with the bright, flat light of the amateur photographer, according to art historian Beatrice Farwell. In another painting, his 1865 *The Mocking of Christ*, art

historian Michael Fried points out, Manet used several telltale signs of “awkward realism” that

quite likely came from photographs. Christ’s feet are oversized and show signs of have worn

modern shoes. A figure in the left foreground seems overscale, like a soldier cutout, and the scene is uncharacteristically organized like the *mise en place* of a television chef—each necessary item arranged just so on diagonal lines. But these clues to the use of photos do not do justice to Manet’s incorporation of the medium into his paintings, Worth argues.

Two hallmarks of Manet’s work are the use of frontal lighting and the varying treatment of different figures and elements in the foreground and background—some precise, some almost sloppily painted. His work looks stripped down, emphasizing some figures and minimizing others, making photographic and non-photographic sources cohabit. He was “intent, not on acknowledging photography’s power, but on subsuming and subordinating it,” Worth writes. “For Manet alone, photography seems to have motivated, and even abetted, a kind of counter-photographic style.”



Brilliant light emanates from ground level in *The Dead Christ and the Angels*, by Edouard Manet. Scholars suspect he used lost photography as a tool in creating the luminescent figure in 1864.

EXCERPT

Shakespeare in Full

The modern biographer who hopes to [reach the essential Shakespeare] will be more likely to succeed as he stands on the shoulders of others. Piety toward the past is becoming and provident too, letting the new arrival on the scene see further. His proper subject is Shakespeare the man, gathered from the plays and poems as well as the life record. Despite what you often hear, the record is

substantial. Many look behind it, however, from snobbery, mischievousness, or the thrall of an idée fixe, seeking another Shakespeare than the one it presents. Some . . . deny that Shakespeare existed at all. Urging the record against them, I am not arguing a case, leaving that to the Sunday supplement, and I am willing to say with James Joyce that Shakespeare was written by someone else with the same name. In so many words, the work will always come first; the life, in relation to it, comes second.

—RUSSELL FRASER, author of *Young Shakespeare* and *Shakespeare: The Later Years*, among other works, in *Sewanee Review* (Fall, 2006).