

# The New Criterion

## Features

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### Radical un-chic

by [James Panero](#)

On Tom Wolfe & the *derrière* garde.

Pablo Picasso was a fraud. So says Tom Wolfe, who does not like Picasso. This much was becoming clear. Picasso, according to Wolfe, “left school just before they taught perspective.” He had to shroud his backgrounds in “fog.” He was a sorry excuse for a draftsman. He rendered “hands that look like the asparagus you get in the store.” That priapic doodler. That asparagus-handed Andalusian. Tom Stoppard sure nailed it in his play *Artist Descending a Staircase*—“Imagination without skill gives us contemporary art.” Picasso had us fooled! “If I couldn’t draw, I would have started a movement myself. I would call it Cubism.”

Tom Wolfe! There he was, dressed in his Sunday best. The physiognomy. The detachable collar. The author of *Radical Chic*, *The Right Stuff*, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Going on about Picasso. And it was starting to sound a little *familiar*. Wolfe is right that the art world is in crisis. But his articulation of this crisis is curious. He repeats and simplifies. He beats up on straw men. He puts on quite a show. Wolfe himself is a draftsman, a cartoonist of some talent who has illustrated his own books and articles. But for Wolfe, the horses in *Guernica* are always “choking on a banana.” Or maybe it’s a “light bulb.” When it comes to modern art, he has been painting history with the same broad brush for over thirty years.

I heard Wolfe recently when he was the final speaker at a weekend-long celebration of the “*Derriere Guard*,” a group founded ten years ago by the composer Stefania de Kenessey. She is now writing an opera of *Bonfire of the Vanities*. That’s one explanation for Wolfe’s presence. But Wolfe has also become this group’s unofficial spokesman. Why *Derriere Guard*? As opposed to *avant-garde* (it’s something of a pun). De Kenessey first considered the term on a drive back to New York from Bennington College. She has since used it to describe those “artists in all media who work at the cutting edge—by rediscovering and reinventing traditional forms and techniques,” according to the program. Wolfe says he could not resist embracing it.

De Kenessey sensed something in the air around Bennington. She reached out across the artistic diaspora and found the “expansive poets,” musical tonalists, realist painters, classical architects, “moral fiction” writers—the lost tribes of the modernist wilderness. Like radical settlers into the occupied territories, back they came to the Left Bank of Bohemia.

Now here in a musty auditorium, Wolfe finds a willing audience for his time-tested routine. No bug-eyed glasses. No strange hair. No conceptual vampire poses. No emos with Yale MFAs about to trade up from Andrea Rosen Gallery for Larry Gagosian. Wolfe’s people are sinewy, strong, healthy, off-the-grid artists. Like those nude bathers jumping off rocks in an Eakins portrait: Man before the Decline and Fall of an artistic Empire.

Ezra Pound's slogan "make it new" has "led to an artistic arms race," notes Frederick Turner, an amiable founding philosopher of rearguard activism who also spoke at the festival. Turner equates the Derriere Guard with everything from developments in natural science to the environmental movement to sex and reproduction. "Each new shocking novelty could only bounce the rubble of an already devastated culture; the only new thing left to do was, of course, the good old thing. New classicists are aiming to restore the pleasure of the arts through a revolution against the ugliness and wretched chaos of the contemporary art scene."

In the fine arts, that means Classical Realism, a movement seeking to reunite beaux-arts technique with classical ideals through a loose network of schools, ateliers, and apprenticeships. This year's Derriere Guard festival brought together a weekend of talks with presentations of realist art and classical architecture, poetry, dance, music, drawing, scenes performed from *Bonfire* the opera, and finally Wolfe himself. The venue was the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, the same midtown New York building that houses the Institute of Classical Architecture and Jacob Collins's year-old Grand Central Academy. [\[1\]](#)

Collins is now the dean of three art schools. In the hours before Wolfe's talk, late for his roundtable, he floats into the Society elevator praising Samuel P. Huntington, the author of *The Clash of Civilizations*. That's not your typical artistic tract, but Collins is not your typical artist. Collins says he's through with the "universal truths" of modernism, which he calls "a simple virus with a simple replicating system to destroy the Western tradition." He wants retrenchment.

Collins is both a participant in and donor to the event, not to say a firebrand. At the roundtable, crammed into the inner studio of his school, Collins lashes out at the complaints of his marginalized colleagues: "It's like being an opposition political party. You can't go around defending yourself by railing against what you are not. The Derriere Guard is still saying that we're in opposition to everything else." Collins is out to change all that. In New York, he is the greatest hope to turn rearguard ideology into action.

But what about that ideology? Ten years ago, de Kenessey inaugurated her first Derriere Guard festival at the Kitchen, a New York venue best known for performances by Laurie Anderson and Karen Finley (the avant-garde chanteuse and the sex activist, respectively). The keynote speaker? Tom Wolfe. What did he talk about? Pablo Picasso. *Reason* magazine ran a feature on the event called "Adieu to the Avant-Garde."

It was not the first time Wolfe went searching for Pablo. In 1986, he gave a talk at the Parish Art Museum in South Hampton, New York, entitled "Pablo Picasso: the Bouguereau of 2020." The thesis? That Picasso will be as forgotten by 2020 as that one time all-star of the nineteenth-century French academy, William-Adolphe Bouguereau, was forgotten by 1920.

Wolfe's hostility goes back even further. Think back to *The Painted Word*, his account of twentieth-century art condensed to 120 index-card-size pages, published in 1975. From Picasso to Pollock, from the critics Greenberg to Rosenberg to Steinberg, from the "art mating ritual" of "the boho dance" to "the consummation" with the society collector, the concepts can be side-splitting (who knew modern art could be this simple?). But the action is canned. It's a fixed fight. *The Painted Word*, like everything Wolfe writes, benefits from the author's dramaturgical abilities. It flows. It's funny. I can understand the words. But it's also a terrible, gimcrack history of one hundred years of artistic activity. The book lacks the joy that animated *Radical Chic*, Wolfe's 1970 account of the Black Panthers eating "little Roquefort cheese morsels rolled into crushed nuts" at Leonard Bernstein's apartment. Wolfe loved that subject. *The Painted Word*, meanwhile, was written from a different place.

With its parvenu promoters and dealers, not to mention its "cultureburg" critics, at times Wolfe's

history comes close to that rancid mythology of modernist domination that once imagined subversive Jewish influences, and more recently identified Henry Luce pushing buttons in the control room of Cold War headquarters. Consider Wolfe's dismissal of Abstract Expressionism: "With nothing going for them except brain power and stupendous rectitude and the peculiar makeup of the art world, [the supporters of Abstract Expressionism] projected this style, this unloved brat of theirs, until it filled up the screen of art history."

Tom Wolfe begins *The Painted Word* with a riff against something the "dean of the arts" had written in *The New York Times*: that an exhibition of realist painters "lacked a persuasive theory." The dean in question was Hilton Kramer. Wolfe keeps after Kramer all the way through *The Painted Word*. "Have the courage of your secret heart, Hilton!" Wolfe exhorts. Kramer shot back with "Tom Wolfe and the Revenge of the Philistines," an article he published in 1975 that later formed the title of his second collection of essays. Here Kramer observed:

This whole revisionist enterprise has contained from the beginning a large element of philistine revenge. . . . What we are seeing, I think, is the beginning of a resurgent campaign to discredit the mainstream of modernist achievement . . . [a] passion to turn back the clock of history, to liquidate all those difficulties of perception and discriminations of feeling that are the very essence of the modernist accomplishment.

The same criticism that Kramer leveled at those "new realists" back in the 1970s still applies. Today's rearguard movement has a theory, but it's not a very persuasive one. In the fine arts, Classical Realism positions itself as the crucible of secret knowledge passed down from the Greeks, rediscovered by the Renaissance, promulgated by the Beaux-Arts academies, nearly exterminated by the modernists, and now resurgent.

Conspiracies lurk at every turn to destroy this true art. The same invisible hand that elevates Edouard Manet above the great academic painter Jean-Louis Meissonier (the subject of Ross King's bestselling book *The Judgment of Paris*) also keeps Joe Illustrator out of a job at Art School U. Little thought is given to the possibility of an evolution in taste, of artistic need, of the vital art that modernism handed down to posterity. Rearguard artists are today creating some wonderful work. At the Derriere Guard exhibition, I was particularly struck by the seascapes of Edward Minoff and the earthy nudes of Camie Davis. But the unexplored issues surrounding them prevent Classical Realism from making important critical distinctions. Bad art repeatedly makes the cut—such as Graydon Parrish's grandiloquent allegories of the terror attacks of 9/11. And retrenchment also insulates Classical Realism from acceptance by the art world at large.

Then there is the wholesale embrace of marginalized art. Do we need more Bouguereau putti? Or how about the acrylic sculptures of Frederick Hart, the artist martyr of the rearguard? Here is how Wolfe began his breathless obituary of this sculptor of airport art in *The New York Times Magazine* in 2000: "Hart consciously, pointedly, aimed for the ultimate in the Western tradition of sculpture, achieved it in a single stroke, then became invisible, and remained invisible, as invisible as Ralph Ellison's invisible man, who was invisible 'simply because people refuse to see me.'"

And finally, is the Derriere Guard really that divorced from the modernist tradition? In 1825, the French socialist Henri de Saint-Simon first applied a military metaphor to fine art, proclaiming "we artists will serve you as an *avant-garde* . . . what a magnificent destiny for the arts is that of exercising a positive power over society." Gustave Courbet understood Saint-Simon's directive better than anyone. He rejected the idealism of the French academy and became the painter of modern life, eventually creating images like *The Origin of the World* of 1866 that were scandalous for their realism. Then there was Edouard Manet, a painter who shocked French society with his *Luncheon on the Grass* of 1863, displayed in the first Salon des Refusés. That painting featured two men at a picnic with, again, a naked woman. Together, these two artists established the foundations

of avant-garde modernism.

With their bohemian milieu and their *épater* style, today's rearguard artists might resemble nothing if not the avant-garde of our time. By and large they are not working up allegories in the tradition of the old beaux-arts—no history paintings of burning Troy or Sabine women. Instead, these artists are painting real life: real landscapes with real trees, and real people. Today's realists are scandalizing the art world with their nudes like it's Courbet and Manet all over again.

In Spring 2007, *Columbia Magazine* ran a story on Jacob Collins, an alumnus, featuring one of his studio nudes on the cover. The flurry of correspondence that followed spread out over two subsequent issues. A graduate from the 1970s wrote in: "There may be a proper place for classical realism, but it need not be on the front page of an internationally respected university publication." History repeats itself: Just this month, prevented from entering Art Basel Miami Beach, the official salon of our day, rearguard artists will be exhibiting in their own Salon des Refusés called "RAM Miami."

In 1871, during the Paris Commune, Courbet had the monumental Vendome Column pulled down (he later had to pay to restore it). In 1909, Filippo Marinetti wrote in his *Futurist Manifesto*: "We rebel against that spineless worshipping of old canvases, old statues and old bric-a-brac, against everything which is filthy and worm-ridden and corroded by time." (Two years later, he threw down leaflets from the Basilica of San Marco calling for Venice's Grand Canal to be paved into a highway.) Today's rearguard movement attacks modernist history with the same iconoclastic rage.

Andy Warhol once said that "nothing is more bourgeois than to be afraid to look bourgeois." Tom Wolfe took note of this in *The Painted Word*. So maybe there is nothing more avant-garde than to be afraid to look avant-garde. To be sure, today's rearguard painters depart in significant ways from aspects of mainstream modernist tradition. They put a high premium on observed reality. They stand against uni-versalism. They sublimate emotion in draftsmanship, rather than the other way around (think of the paintings of de Kooning). They have less faith in technology and progress. But they are part of a more complex and more interesting phenomenon than their champions like Wolfe would have us believe. They also find themselves at a particular moment in art. In "The Age of the Avant-Garde," an article published in *Commentary* in 1972 that gave its title to his first essay collection, Hilton Kramer signals this moment for criticism:

The pressures of new experience [point] toward renegotiating our pact with the past and reexamining all those restrictive clauses that have so often rendered our commerce with "tradition" simply foolish and parochial. And this means, first of all, re-examining the great epoch of the avant-garde itself. . . . The task of criticism today is, in large part, an archaeological task—the task of digging out a lost civilization from the debris that has swamped and buried it.

The same holds true for today's artists. They must set about digging through the rubble. At the conclusion of this year's Derriere Guard festival, Tom Wolfe remarked, "Do the kind of work that you would like to see. By 2020, the world will be yours." For the Classical Realists, the extent to which they can come to terms with the art of the past will determine their future success. If they can comfortably inhabit their own contradictions, Wolfe's prophecy might actually come to pass.

## Notes

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1. "The Derriere Guard: 10th Anniversary Festival" took place on October 13 and 14, 2007. For more on Classical Realism and The Grand Central Academy, see my essay "The New Old School," *The New Criterion*, September 2006. [Go back to](#)

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