

The Escape Artist



In Mark Rothko's "Art as a Form of Action," an essay from his posthumously published book *The Artist's Reality*, he begins with an elucidation on the notion of escapism in art. He writes,

Art has often been described as a form of escape from action. It has been pointed out that the artist, finding the practical affairs of the world too unpleasant, withdraws from the world of the imagination in order to exempt himself from this unpleasantness.¹

Rothko also purports that a person for whom the practical affairs of the world are paramount and who knows nothing of the world of dreams and imagination, is even more an escapist from reality than the artist.²

In fact, the man who spends his entire life turning the wheels of industry so that he has neither time nor energy to occupy himself with any other needs of his human organism is by far a greater escapist than the one who developed his art. For the man who develops his art does make adjustments to his physical needs. He understands that man must have bread to live, while the other cannot understand that you cannot live by bread alone.³

Throughout his painting career, Gary Komarin has

subscribed to this very credo – making paintings that hover in a kind of dream-like metaphysics. Somewhere between abstraction and reference, between reality and escapism, Komarin's work is guided by a keen awareness of the formal qualities inherent in painting – line, shape, colour, form – along with a belief that intention should be altogether absent from painting in order to achieve the most intuitive outcome.

Komarin comes out of the American tradition in art making first championed by Clement Greenberg, in which an exclusion of figuration and a push toward flatness and gesture was of primary importance. In this manner, Komarin is intuitively led toward the non-pictorial, allowing him to push the boundaries between surface tension and atmosphere, equilibrium and imbalance, achieving a kind of push/pull dynamic on the canvas stretching far beyond transcription.

Komarin is a colourist of the highest mark – his instinct for whimsy and subtlety rendered through pigment is unparalleled by any artist making abstract paintings today, and perhaps only equaled by Rothko's infamously reverberating palette. Floppy shapes are drawn and painted overtop luscious fields of colour, at times suggestive of familiar forms but never overtly demanding in their signification. The artist's intuition leads him in a direction that is neither right nor wrong – it acts by way of sentiment rendered on a flat surface. The painter, never quite sure what he searches for, and not quite expecting any particular result, rejects that is flat, meditating interminably upon the quasi-surface that is his life's work.

It seems that Komarin finds nourishment in the visceral and repetitive process he employs in painting. How else could he make and remake the work ad infinitum? He may feel relief while working or escaping from work or reality, and is thereby able to continue in this fashion without cessation. Rothko describes this kind of routine as a form of social action, as a means of contributing to society by way of indulging one's need to create, thereby elevating the artist's seemingly non-utilitarian labours. Rothko writes,

When the artist produces something which is intelligible only to himself, then he has already contributed to himself as an individual, and with this effect has already contributed to the social world (just as we benefit ourselves, and therefore also society, when we eat).⁴

One might think this statement a bit of a stretch, but for

a painterly painter like Komarin, there is real truth in it. For while the artist indulges in what seems like a selfish activity, inwardly massaging his private need to create, he in fact indulges the rest of us in our need to ruminate, and muse over that which both soothes and stimulates our bodies and minds.

Therefore, has Komarin's process an end point, direction, purpose? The work and the artist, never quite finished (here we speak of the sort of painting that basks in the moment of completion as the motive for completion), escape reality by denying the possibility of a finished product. For Komarin, abstraction is by nature, an incomplete act. Without resigning to difference (understood here as a means to an end: the work itself, the artist's work) Komarin doubly negates what he then becomes – the embodiment of process and product.

The rejection of the finished work becomes the work itself, and in repeating this process the artist perpetuates the escape from 'reality,' it affords. Komarin does not believe in the quick fix of formalism, of resolution.

Emancipated in such a manner, Komarin develops broad and captivating outlines for himself and the viewer, offering a proper medium through which to perceive what one does not specifically know: presence without reference to time. By postponing or displacing resolution, an exhilarating nod to transcendentalism, Komarin offers us the kind of space in which to wonder infinitely, suspending our need to quantify and thereby qualify our speculative 'moments' on earth.

Robert Otto Epstein | New York 2009

1 Rothko, Mark; *The Artist's Reality Philosophies of Art*, edited by Christopher Rothko; 2004, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, p. 9; 2 p. 10; 3 p. 10; 4 p. 10.