

RR: Why did you title these new paintings “Existential Portraits”?

GC: I think the paintings have to do with the idea of people’s despair today, with the idea that they don’t really have a choice. They may think that they have a choice, and to a certain degree they’re being told that they have a choice, but the choices they make are very much within the geo-political map for how people should live their lives at any given time. So in the paintings, these characters expand beyond those boundaries. They are questioning their existence. Faced with despair, they decide to live way out there beyond the periphery of consciousness.

RR: I wonder if these new works could also be seen as portraits of the predicament of figurative painting today. They bring to mind something William de Kooning said when he was asked, during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, whether it hadn’t become impossible for a contemporary artist to paint the human figure. In a reply worthy of Samuel Beckett, he said, “Yes, it is impossible. But it is also impossible *not* to paint the figure!”

GC: I have painted both abstract and figurative paintings. They sometimes run parallel to one another. By looking at what was formally considered a pure abstraction, one can see the figure in an entirely subjective way.

In his time, De Kooning applied a new language of abstraction to the classic form to arrive at his iconic images of women. Today painters apply traditional means to arrive at a conceptual image.

RR: Part of the perpetual predicament of painting is negotiating a relationship to all that has come before. Do you think painters have to directly address this burden of history?

GC: I believe that painting needs to transform in order for it to become interesting for each and every generation, but I think of it more in terms of being liberated by history. Liberated by what has come before. What I’m thinking about is what I call a “theory of relative languages in painting” which basically proposes the idea that a single painting can have multiple language properties acting simultaneously to create a single entity. So the way that I paint in technical terms is very traditional: I start with a ground on the canvas; then I make drawings. I make sketches and sometimes I’m involving a number of images from different paintings, with slight

variations at times. I think of them as themes and variations, composites of various psychological states painted in various different ways and a continuation of my overall concept of Artificial Realism.

RR: How would you define Artificial Realism?

GC: This idea came to me in the early 80s as a way to describe my painting - "the realistic representation of that which is artificial". I wrote a kind of artificial realist manifesto in which I stated: It's about dismantling one reality and constructing another from the same parts and that various concrete objects are not attached to their parts alone. I was thinking of Picasso's bull's head made from a bicycle and Duchamp's ready-mades. Essentially what I am painting is the state in which the image-time of one reality superimposed in a field of another simultaneous presence now becomes a conjunctive new hyper-reality or hybrid image showing the simultaneous presences; as in the 'Existential Portraits' [ILLUSTRATE 1992 *Interchangeable Reality*]

RR: You meld a far-ranging array of references in these works – not only from the history of art, but also from cartoons, commercial culture (like the Playboy bunny), and comic strips.: As an artist living in an era of mass media, are you afraid of becoming culturally irrelevant?

GC: I would think the greatest fear of an artist is to be banished from the history of art; to be expelled from art history. And that brings me to ask "What are the forbidden apples of art that should not be picked?" Or is it what Cezanne showed us- that it's the apple itself, once again, that needs transformation. I think Cezanne's apples come from Chardin's still lives. These sublime apples were brutally transformed by Cezanne into something that indicated various planes and shifting perspectives in a single painting, which as we know led to Cubism. In effect, this is what I am talking about by introducing simultaneous languages into one image. But rather than ways of seeing, it involves ways of thinking; substituting mathematical formulas of perspective with a new system of perception which truly differentiates the word eclectic from dialectic. You could call it ['dialectical perceptualism'], a kind of harmonic resolution of opposites.

RR: You mentioned earlier that the Existential Portraits are dealing with a pervasive contemporary despair and perhaps also isolation. In a certain

respect, these works seem like a kind of delirious translation and updating of some of Edward Hopper's melancholy images of alienated urbanites.

GC: I wanted to capture the characters in these paintings at the extreme height of whatever moment they're in – in that static moment of chaos, and to picture them as abstract compositions that are set in destitute places and isolated rooms. Everything takes place in a relatively impoverished kind of situation. In that sense I thought a little about Hopper capturing the despair of loneliness. Hopper always uses a surprising color here and there in his painting, and the sorrow is suspended with a touch of light.

RR: When we look at Hopper's paintings, we are usually in the position of a voyeur, observing characters who take no account of our presence. But in almost all of your new paintings the figures seem to defiantly return our scrutiny. They're confrontational in a way that seems to demand that we acknowledge our own motives in looking. What were you thinking in positioning them in this way, in having them staring out at a hypothetical viewer?

GC: They are actors and we are their glass wall. When you make eye contact with an actor on stage it's a strange experience, it seems that the gaze is sometimes straight at you and sometimes right through you.

RR: In staring back at us, they also seem to implicate us in their situation. Even in the paintings that depict couples having sex, this attitude deflates the voyeuristic impulse in our looking, as well as our tendency to project ourselves into an image. Instead it seems to lay the ground for some kind of exchange in a way that goes back to Manet's Olympia, and the effect of her confrontational gaze.

GC: Olympia has a kind of smile that provokes sexuality. In the couples there is a primal scream that comes from their union. The sexuality they provoke is ironic.

RR: Kierkegaard maintained that true despair does not even know its own condition. The characters in your new paintings, on the other hand, appear self-conscious of their alienation and loneliness, and invite us to witness it.

GC: There's no unwillingness to be captured. They are living in the traps that have been set for humanity. I did one sculpture called *The Trapped Priest*, which combined a bronze cast of a shopping cart and a priest.

RR: And despite their destitution, they exude a curious air of liberation – as if they were past caring what we think of them.

GC: That's what I'm proposing as a way of being. I am proposing the need for a whole new culture.

RR: Is that how you also see your own position as an artist?

GC: I feel that there's no real limit as an artist. And I think that, again this is one of the existential aspects of painting as a practice. The freedom that you face when choosing what to paint can be overwhelming - that's why someone like Jackson Pollock probably drank himself to death. But that freedom is also one of the great things about art.

RR: Perhaps that accounts in part for the way these figures can be seductive and repulsive at the same time. They embody a position that is simultaneously frightening and appealing. This is something that also comes across in the way that they solicit different kinds of looks from the viewer, and how they often look back at us with eyes that don't match or don't even seem to belong to the same face.

GC: Often one eye's looking at you and the other eye is more recessive. You're seduced by the willing eye and then stared at by the aggressive one. As you move into the portrait there is something paranoiac about each part.

RR: So it's like they're inviting us to enter their space and at the same time they're pushing us out, with the result that the paintings lock us into an irresolvable rhythm of entering and withdrawing. This seems like one of the ways that your paintings produce multiple registers of seeing. Another way would be the manner in which, say, you paint one arm of a reclining nude as a mass with volume, while treating her other arm as a more or less flat plane.

GC: This is what I am getting at with relativity at the core. There is no center of an infinite line and when applied to painting this could mean

chronology is as interchangeable as the individual body parts themselves. We are entering a discussion about a painting and the meanings of an arm as opposed to the representation. In fact, if I think about it, the arms of my figures have gone through many transformations. (ILLUSTRATE with three details) So in effect, the arm, you see, is another vehicle for transformation.

RR: An erotic undercurrent runs through many of these new works. Several paintings depict copulating couples and a number of portraits feature black-booted nudes that suggest a kind of spin on Helmut Newton's uber-models. What got you interested in making paintings that directly reference sexual desire?

GC: I think it is the uptight conservative climate that got me going. They are a reaction to the façade of morality that hides the fanatical undercurrent that we are faced with today.

RR: There is something sexual – or vaguely genital – about the faces of the figures in these paintings. With their tumescent cheeks and erectile necks, their faces commingle elements that suggest displaced body parts – like an anatomical orgy.

GC: That's a good way to describe it. I consider them to be the feelings or the inside of that person's private life being visible on the outside. At the same time, I see them as landscapes where the forms function together to make a face, a kind of topographical portrait

RR: Tell me about the figure you refer to as "Jean-Louis," who appears to be a key figure in this new cast of characters. You have painted a number of variations of Jean-Louis, who is a curious mix of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century social types.

GC: *What* is Jean Louis? Is he a waiter, a chef, a driver? Is he a real person? Or is he a Chuck Close painting gone wrong? I remember seeing Chuck's [INSERT DATE?] retrospective at the Modern and thinking it was an unbelievable exhibition. "Jean Louis" appeared and he took on the same framing used in Chuck's self-portraits from the 1970s. (ILLUSTRATE detail Chuck Close self-portrait with Jean Louis side by side). He has no other origin, really.

RR: That's interesting that Chuck Close provided a jumping off point, as a number of works in this new group of paintings seem to obliquely reference photographic sources or effects. I see traces of this in the doubled face of *Jean Louis' Mind* which recalls the anatomical doubling found in Surrealist photography, and also in the compositional bluntness, redolent of a snapshot or a piece of amateur pornography, that characterizes some of the canvases of couples having sex. There are also figures – Playboy bunnies, those Helmut Newton-type nudes – that recall photographic sources. Yet unlike the many painters today who essentially translate photographic images, you don't work from photographs.

GC: This is related to a course I taught at Harvard University called "Painting Memory," which was about the idea of not using any photographic material at all, but relying on your mind to take a snapshot, at the moment when you're in the Laundromat or at the barbershop. By recalling these indelible images in your mind, you can then paint them, give them a physical presence, in much the way that an artist copies a photograph only in this case you're transcribing a mental phenomenon.

RR: So in this way, perhaps, your work enacts a radical response to the whole photographic enterprise of copying the world. In its place it insists on the possibilities, and power, of transformation.

GC: The continual evolution and transformation that took place in the portraits of *Jean Louis* come from my sense of this character escaping his original self. And the idea of "the self" becomes the subject. It's because he evolved from memory that the permutations of a single portrait were possible. He is no closer to a self or further from it. That's what I mean by saying he extends equally to the left as far as he does to the right- so no fixed point can ever be located, no photographic source. He becomes autonomous. At the same time he poses the question: *Can anyone ever really be himself?*

RR: That idea of transformation as a means of escape comes up, in a more melancholy register, in your double portrait of Batman and the Playboy Bunny. Masks and costumes are, of course, traditional ways of transforming ourselves. But instead of summoning the power and sexuality associated with these costumes, this portrait conjures up a pair of dejected swingers from a suburban wife-swapping party.

GC: I think the pedestals these heroes once occupied in the American psyche have degenerated. I would say they have become irrelevant in the scheme of today's politics. And in that sense they are burned out superheroes; they're ghosts of themselves. What they've come down to is commercial enterprises, whereas people used to believe in Superman, or Batman or the Playboy Bunny. In effect they have become disenfranchised.

RR: Several of these new works, like "The Young Architect," transform the figure by rendering it in almost architectural terms. They have rectilinear and rigid bodies that suggest that they've been completely objectified.

GC: I think of that one painting as a portrait of a young boy, but he's basically an architectural site or something of that sort. He has become what he does. He is like a cityscape, in a sense all hard shapes. And I think like that as a painter – in painting these it's like I'm sculpting them in a strange way. That might have something to do with why I'm not so interested in conveying a sense of things like the veins and the blood running through the body or the way the collarbones poke out from the flesh as much as the color values and the shapes of the figures.

RR: Along with pop culture figures like Superman and Batman, your recent paintings also introduce a new group of anonymous archetypes in your work – characters with generic names like the Barber, the Salesman, Uncle Joe, and the Young Architect.

GC: Even though these characters are invented, the positions that they occupy actually exist in society, so that potentially they can kick off a mental discussion about the roles that real people play in life.

RR: Yet I find it hard to imagine the previous existence of these characters – to visualize what they were doing before, or after, the moment in which you portray them. They seem to occupy a present from which there is no exit. Nevertheless, elements of narrative inflect some of these pictures, such as, for example, "The Salesman," where we see a character with a carrot stuck into his back.

GC: Rather than a narrative there is often a philosophical subtext which acts as a compositional structure. I painted a number of paintings representing

the carrot. It's a metaphor of false hope, the carrot is dangling in front of you, like the dagger in Hamlet.

RR: But even without strong narrative elements, these paintings achieve a curious believability.. Do you deliberately set out to imbue these unreal characters with a high reality quotient by painting them in a particular way?

GC: [There is a distinction here that could be made between believability and quality.] I gave a lecture at Columbia University about Michael Kwaklestein, whose book on Leonardo's physiognomic distortions is brilliant. He posits that the grotesque figures that Da Vinci drew were from his imagination but required meticulous details based on observations of reality in order to be believable. That is really the key to these new paintings of mine.

RR: Part of their believability also stems from the fact that these characters, however freakish, appear psychologically plausible in some way. They may look bizarre, but they also embody familiar emotions.

GC: I think they are able to reflect the emotional range of a human being. They can embody the despair, the heartache, the love and the happiness of any of us. They're capable of all of those things.

RR: I think one of the remarkable aspects of many of these portraits is the way that characters can seem sinister and also vulnerable at the same time

GC: Some evoke a theatrical quality that can be comedic or scary. You have the power as a viewer to expose any one of these characters at any moment, which creates a vulnerable atmosphere to the painting.

RR: The painting of "Uncle Joe" seems like an important work in this new group. You portray him lying out in a meadow with his bottle and a cigarette, and bubbles floating out of his penis. He seems turned-on and self-sufficient, as inhabiting his own custom-made universe.

GC: Uncle Joe is a pure existentialist: faced with despair, he decided to grab a little plot of land and live way out there beyond the reach of society. I guess he's kind of a Thoreau type. He's a composite of all those sort of dreams people have of getting 'away', but he's also a composite of various

kinds of paintings floating through my mind. He is in a landscape detached from any specific place.

RR: Do you see these characters as representing orphaned or dislocated belief systems?

GC: I see them as fractions of humanity battling extinction.