

Visions of the Modern

by JOHN GOLDING

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John Golding is best known for his book, *Cubism: a History and an Analysis*, published in 1959, the first serious, sustained analysis of the movement. It is still the best general book on the subject, required reading for anyone interested in modern art. Its aim was to describe the characteristics of the style and to trace the details of its evolution from picture to picture. *Visions of the Modern* is quite different, being a collection of occasional essays and reviews written over more than thirty years; since they have been revised for republication, this book is neither an historical source nor a systematic account of modernism.

Golding is a painter for whom art history is an abiding interest, but also a sideline. There are considerable advantages to this position for the reader is never allowed to forget that painting is a technical practice. Golding makes very close readings of formal developments, convincingly tracing influences, and examining the intimate link between aesthetic and technical quality. Each essay is a product of his comprehensive knowledge of the history of early modernism, laden with useful and telling detail. His familiarity with literature also serves him well: Duchamp is illuminated by Laforgue, and Breton by Valéry. Golding admits his bias towards the French modern movement, and we might add that he sticks to the accepted modernist canon, and gives most weight to painting, especially that of Matisse and Picasso. His exclusive concentration on high art denies him relevant insights into Duchamp's work and Cubist collage.

Golding presents painting as a specialist, independent discipline—not mere formalism but rather a dialogue of tradition—yet he writes for the general reader, always assuming that the practice of high art is relevant to everyone. The individual artist is at the core of the analysis, details of form yielding details of psychology, the development of style implicitly accompanied by the development of personality. Golding's entire apparatus of learning is deployed to suggest the connection between the aesthetic and the emotional. Modernism becomes more than anything a collection of characters. Consequently, Golding is less comfortable with Marcel Duchamp than with figures who were unequivocally committed to producing art. Despite Duchamp's enormous influence, Golding feels, 'I still do not think he was an artist who lived his life with visual intensity and joy. His example has produced a great deal of work that is primarily cerebral and that for my own taste gives too little visual stimulus and delight'.

Of Cubism, Golding modestly writes: 'When I published a book on the subject more than thirty years ago, I felt that I had to a certain extent at least come to terms with it. I continue to enjoy looking at Cubist pictures as much as I ever did, but I have come increasingly to realize that I do not really understand them, and I am not sure that anyone else does either.' Elsewhere, describing paintings by Picasso and Braque made in 1912, he adds; 'The works of this

high, analytic, crystalline phase of Cubism are to me also the most mysterious; and I have come to believe that during their invention of a new pictorial language the two painters were now being carried along by forces beyond their own control.' Other similar statements lead one to ask what, if great art is fundamentally mysterious and indefinable, are the essays in question meant to do. If they merely gesture towards some ineffable quality, this might explain their weighty, narrative language of risks, lessons, achievements and, above all, progress. The isolated pursuit of a specialisation has produced a deep-seated mysticism.

Cubism: a History and an Analysis marked a new standard of professionalism in the study of the history of modernism, and the same grounding and thoroughness is evident in these essays. This new book, confident in its judgements, committed to the idea that high art has a universal appeal, seems to speak to us from another age. Even in Golding's discussion of Cubism, relatively little of the extensive new work on the movement has been taken on board. Art history has moved on, becoming more specialised and technical, but at the same time losing agreed standards by which to judge works of art and itself. Postmodern anti-humanism has infected it and any simple notion of progress has been abandoned. In Golding's writing, art history is at the cusp where specialisation was about to produce a closed discourse.

For Golding it was psychology which made the technical and particular practice of high art relevant to wider issues: of his own work he says that colours initiate dialogues, producing sensations of light, which echo or induce psychological experience: 'To this extent the paintings are about states of mind, although I suppose in a sense everybody's paintings are, in one way or another'. A committed humanism lies at the base of Golding's project and his detailed and specialised analyses are a tribute to their subjects. Yet if there is a mystery at the heart of great art, it may be turned to any purpose. Once it is detached from an idea of progress, anything goes; this is why Golding finds Duchamp's irony so disturbing.

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