

# THE RUSTLE OF PAINTING

Jacques Lacan, David Row,  
Brenda Zlamany

## I

Having been asked to contribute to a discussion on “Lacan and Visual Art,” my first impulse was to say that the subject I can make some contribution to is the reverse: “Visual Art and Lacan.”\* Unfortunately, I suspect mine to be a much smaller subject. “Lacan and Visual Art” is a big subject, not just because it is very clear that Lacan personally had an intense interest in visual art, in painting, but because his discourse is hungry for images – even though it is also, as Martin Jay (among others) has recently pointed out, an intensely anti-ocularcentric one.<sup>1</sup> Any reader of Lacan immediately notices that his is not an “abstract” discourse but one that forwards itself by means of images, pictures, diagrams, and so forth. It’s not a case of there being, here, some concepts in need of images and, there, some images in need of concepts. Art may already have more concepts than it knows what to do with.

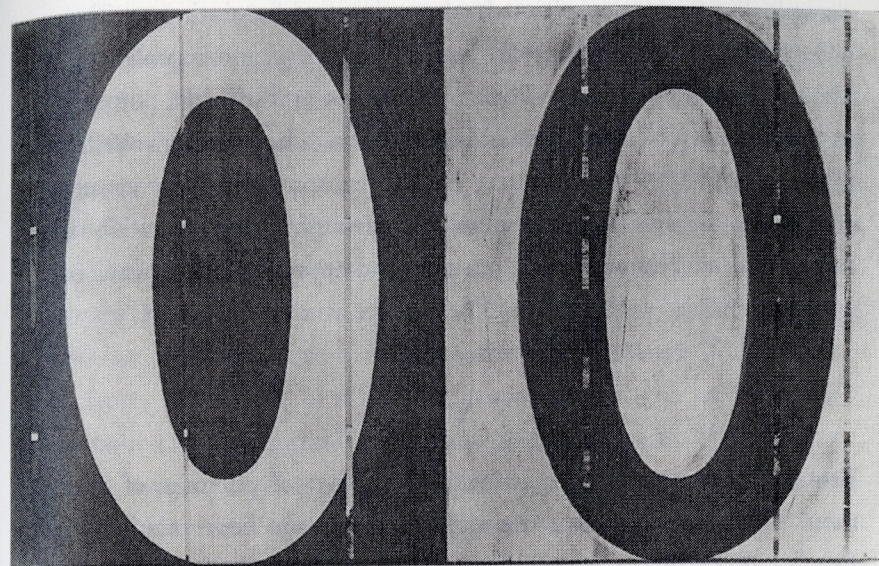
\*This chapter is a revised version of an essay originally published in *Lacanian Ink* 9, Winter 1995.

## II

In looking over my own writings to see if and how I had cited Jacques Lacan, I noticed that there was a single case of an artist I had written about twice, in both cases citing Lacan. The artist is David Row, and so I would like to begin by discussing his work. In interpreting his three-panel paintings of 1991, in which fragments of arcs butt up against one another as elements in intensely chromatic fields, I had borrowed from the literary critic René Girard the notion of the narrative structure called “triangular desire”: the desire of one character for another is always mediated by the real or imagined desire of a third.<sup>2</sup> “In these paintings,” I wrote, “each panel appears to seek its completion, to make good its lack, by joining itself to the fragmentation of another; but (the words are Jacques Lacan’s) ‘what the one lacks is not what is hidden in the other,’ and to the extent that a stable structure is attained, it is only because of the troubling presence of a third panel, which is also attempting to use another to complete itself in a wholly different way.”<sup>3</sup> So in this instance my citation of Lacan is secondary, both in the sense that I cite him to clarify a notion suggested by quite another source, but also in the sense that, if I remember correctly, this particular quotation derived from my reading, not the as yet untranslated seminar which is its source, but rather from the work of Slavoj Žižek in which I found it. In a broader discussion, I might have drawn a connection between Girard’s triangle and the triadic oedipal dynamic subsequent to the introjection of the paternal prohibition, what Lacan punningly called “le non du père.” But that would have been to broach the distinction between the “imaginary” and the “symbolic” – not something I would undertake lightly.

## III

A more direct (though still parenthetical) use of Lacan occurs in my review of Row's 1994 exhibition, and it is one that also retrospectively illuminates what I had been thinking of three years previously. The more recent paintings show a marked shift in Row's work. It is clear that, as I wrote, "color, while far from an afterthought, is a recessive element in the new paintings, giving way to more broadly structural – or better, *logical* – concerns."<sup>4</sup> Here the arcs of the earlier work have yoked themselves together to form ovals – the numeral zero, in fact. As I pointed out, zero is what the logician Gottlob Frege called "the number which belongs to the concept 'not identical with itself.'"<sup>5</sup> Lacan himself writes that "what specifies the scopic field and engenders the satisfaction proper to it is the fact that, for structural reasons, the fall of the subject always remains unperceived, for it is reduced to zero."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this very non-self-identity is what called for the doubling of the zero in each painting (Fig. 14). The mathematical use of the symbol zero is surely, as Brian Rotman calls it, "a self-absenting move," but for that very reason it continues to refer to a subject capable of this self-removal. Whereas Row's previous three-panel paintings, as I pointed out, "seemed to designate a dispersed and non-totalized subjectivity, his conscription of this representational abstraction – this figure which is not one – and particularly its specular doubling through the abutment of panels, seems to invoke the empty specularly of the (Lacanian) Imaginary ego yoking its fragmentary impulses into a closed, self-reflecting totality around a primordial lack."<sup>7</sup> I was somewhat disturbed by this apparent assumption of what, in his famous essay on the "Mirror Stage," Lacan had referred to as "a form of totality that I shall call orthopaedic . . . the armor of an alienating identity, which will mark with its



**Figure 14.** David Row, *No Data*, 1993. Oil and wax on canvas, 50 × 96 in. (Courtesy of the artist)

rigid structure the subject's entire mental development,"<sup>8</sup> especially since I had identified elatedly with the assumption of a fragmented, untotalized subjectivity traversed by uncontrolled flows of desire I had discovered in the 1991 paintings. Why this newly closed, totalized, rigorous, and monumental identity?

## IV

At this question, a cut – to a rather different set of ovals, and a somewhat different set of problems for painting. An abstract painting can never exactly be a diagram, but its essential problems have to do with traversals of a surface. They have to do with the lateral. A portrait is something else: it has do with problems in depth. It is a negotiation with what is in front and what is behind. Portraiture

occupies an unusual position in representational painting, neither occupied, as history and genre are, by narrative and morals, nor, like the “genres without a subject,” landscape and still-life, pointing in the direction of formalism and abstraction. The portrait’s burden is the specificity of the concrete encounter, something that cannot completely be situated or generalized through either narrative or formalization. Nonetheless, I am going to approach it by means of anecdote.

## V

Brenda Zlamany has been painting a number of portraits of bald men. Here we may have the right to see some near relation to Row’s ciphers of closed, totalized, rigid, and monumentalized subjectivity: the male ego, in short. But the portrait is an encounter with this ego, not a mapping of it. My anecdote is this. I was in the studio, looking at these portraits. I pointed out that in all but one, the subject faces the viewer – if you will, the painter – directly. Only in one, that of Christian Leigh (significantly, a curator rather than an artist), does the subject turn away, avoiding eye contact. The painter explained that this was the first of the portraits. “I wasn’t ready to paint the eyes yet. It took me a while to master the gaze.” As we continued to look at the paintings, she continued to expatiate on how she saw the portraits as being portraits of the gaze – the idea that the gaze was really what these paintings are about. Then she began to tell me that the last visitor to her studio had been a Lacanian analyst, and that this person had proposed instead that the paintings’ true subject was death. Well, analysts are always wrong about painting, I reminded her. They don’t know how to *look*, it’s not their job. Clearly, any chain of associations will always come around to death sooner or later, so you can never really be

wrong saying something is about death, and a bald head will always to some degree indicate what a poet once called “the skull beneath the skin”; nonetheless, to say these paintings were specifically and particularly about death seemed beside the point. “Do you want to hear *my* misinterpretation of your paintings?” I asked. “It’s true that these are not what you say they’re about – they’re not about the gaze at all. As I look at them as a group, what begins to disturb me are the ears. The ears are the only parts of these paintings that, from an academic viewpoint, are doubtfully rendered. The reason is clearly not a lack of skill. The reason is that the ears are the symbolic rather than realistic portion of the portraits. The ears are where things get ‘charged’ beyond the capacity of ‘straight’ rendition to capture what is going on. These men are not looking at you so much as they are listening to you – listening to hear between the words, through your actions, to hear what you’re *thinking*. They want to figure out what you want with them, what you want with their images.” My continued confidence in this assertion is such that I am even willing to show Zlamany’s portrait of Leonardo Drew, which is exceptional in the series because it seems uninvolved with this problem of the ear – this subject is shown as free of an anxiety that affects the others.

## VI

I was very proud of my interpretation of the portraits as being portraits of listening, not of the gaze. I also began to reflect that in fact, logically, the gaze of the one portrayed can never reach the painter – nor need she ever apprehend his gaze – because there is always an intervening apparatus; whether it is a camera or an easel and canvas makes no difference. She looks at him in order to look harder somewhere else, at the canvas on which she will paint. Some

further reading of Lacan, however, led me to realize that my interpretation was not exactly wrong but was incomplete. The gaze exists in the form of listening. In analyzing a passage from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Lacan remarks that

if you turn to Sartre's own text, you will see that, far from speaking of the emergence of this gaze as something that concerns the organ of sight, he refers to the sound of rustling leaves, suddenly heard while out hunting, to a footstep heard in a corridor. And when are these sounds heard? At the moment when he has presented himself in the action of looking through a keyhole. A gaze surprises him in the function of voyeur, disturbs him, overwhelms him, and reduces him to a feeling of shame.<sup>9</sup>

So one apprehends the gaze of the other by means of the ear. Doesn't this leave us with the conclusion that these paintings are about the gaze after all – but not the gaze of the sitter, the subject of the portrait. The paintings are about the gaze of the painter as marked by the ear of the sitter.

## VII

My next image is another painting by Brenda Zlamany, *Cristina #2* (Fig. 15). Here the subject is as clearly female as those of the others were clearly male, and this is just as clearly marked by the roundness of an oval – there the bald head, here the pregnant belly. And another oval as well: if the painting is hung at a normal level, our gaze is met not by the woman's eye but rather by her nipple. In fact, our impression might be that her gaze occurs through the nipple, that she looks at us with her nipple. Further contemplation of the painting reveals this as a ruse, however. The nipple is, so to speak, a fetish this woman projects as bait for our gaze, but her face



Figure 15. Brenda Zlamany, *Cristina #2*, 1994. Oil on panel. (Courtesy of the artist)

reveals the vulnerability of one who imagines that her subterfuge will be easily discovered. She is studying the viewer, as it were, from behind the nipple. And what about the ear? She is not listening, as the men were. Her ears are hidden, she has her own intervening apparatus. The earrings she wears are by far the brightest spots on

this canvas, and, like the breast, they serve the function of displacing attention from her eyes, which would otherwise have been the points of brightest light. Where the men revealed the gaze of the painter through the aggressiveness of their retaliatory listening, this woman reveals it through her propitiatory offering of certain lures. In this we see, not as it might appear, a representation of a difference between the genders, but a difference in identification between portraitist and subject. In one of his most astute passages on painting, Lacan has this to say:

It might be thought at first that, like the actor, the painter wishes to be looked at. I do not think so. I think that there is a relation with the gaze of the spectator, but that it is more complex. The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, of the painting, might be summed up thus – *You want something to see? Well, take a look at this!* He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one's weapons. This is the pacifying, Apollonian effect of painting. Something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the *laying down*, of the gaze.<sup>10</sup>

The woman who posed for this painting is posed as she is because she is doing what an artist does. The men who posed for the portraits, although for the most part they really are artists, are posed as they are because they are in competition with the artist who painted them. Perhaps she has used her art to transform them into critics – an artist's revenge on her fellow artists. (This point leads me to recall with satisfaction my prediction, when Zlamany was just beginning to venture into portraiture, that it could make her art "even more subtle, seductive, and cruel.")<sup>11</sup> In any case, we "lay down our gaze" on the artist's self-portrait as her own sister.

## VIII

But although it would give me great pleasure to conclude in the contemplation of that remarkable image, the questions I had about David Row's painting have continued to vex me. Seen again in the orange afterglow of that pregnant oval, Row's ovals begin to look a little different. Perhaps I was being reductive – too much like a psychoanalyst – in my understanding of Row's recent work. Yes, those enclosed ellipses display a new reserve in comparison to the earlier paintings. But looking more closely at the internal logic of the diptychs, I can see that the curved forms should rather be seen in dialogue with the grids that underlie and traverse them. In that case the zeros begin to take on an aspect that is more vulnerable, egglike, sheltering what they encircle. The jubilation I felt on seeing Row's 1991 paintings begins to sound suspiciously like that of the child recognizing its reflection in the mirror – even though what I thought I saw reflected there was a postspecular subjectivity. My misgivings about the recent diptychs might have had something to do with their refusal to project this subjectivity, their way not of denying it but of holding it in reserve, protecting it. I ended my second review of David Row by noting a "choice [that] throws us back upon a judgement of taste such as resists any formalization," and I sense that I am ending there once again.<sup>12</sup> What I had forgotten in my earlier interpretation of Row's recent work is that, after all, abstraction does operate in depth as well as laterally, and that if there are two "figures" inscribed on these paintings, there is also the triangulation with a third figure, namely the person who is looking. Row's earlier paintings had been structured with multiple points of access and egress, granting the viewer a pleasurable mobility, whereas the new ones implied a stereoptic fixity of viewpoint that could be uncomfortable. Yet, as a friend of mine wisely ob-

served in discussing the “pair objects” of the sculptor Roni Horn, “To experience the same thing twice puts the first under erasure and makes the second redundant. It creates a preclusion of hierarchy.”<sup>13</sup> This doubling faces us with a choice, and in the most extreme sense possible: a choice with no criteria to fall back on. That is why these difficult, unrelenting paintings keep sending me back to the effort of concentrated receptivity – of that *listening* rather than looking which is the fated role of the critic.

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II

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## Italian Interlude

Let's artists seem more drawn than others to attempting to change their identities by changing their names. Andrea de Chirico may have changed his to Alberto Savinio in order to avoid comparison with his older brother, but how did Luigi Filippino (born in 1896, became Filippo de Pisis? More revealing yet might be to trace the process by which de Pisis (again, like Savinio) transformed himself from a writer who dabbled in painting to a painter who also wrote. That's a process I'm in no position to reconstruct. What we know that from around 1916 on, de Pisis (and de Chirico) were working in the same circle. In the September of that year, de Pisis wrote to de Chirico: "I have just read 'Dada' in Italy, in the work of the 'Dada' group, 'L'Enfer d'Enfer.' Indeed a language of the future is appearing in between France and de Pisis's work. It is the work of the 'Dada' group that left no more space for de Pisis's mature work."

<sup>13</sup> This chapter is a version of an essay originally published in *Artforum*, January 1988.