

DON PERLIS—MAGICIAN OF THE REAL

Magical realism, Werner Haftmann writes, arose to resist “the constructivist tendencies of Cubism and the formal tendencies of abstract painting,” as well as to “confront objective reality,” without denying its “evocative power”—its connection to the “magical depths.” More subtly, Don Perlis assimilates rather than resists constructivism and formalism, subsuming them as details of reality. They add to its magic, but, as Perlis makes clear, it takes human magic to uncover the magic of objective reality.

Thus, in *Transformation*, *Transformation 1*, *Girl in the Box* (all 1999), and *Woman Without a Center* (1998-99), the background curtain is an abstract pattern painting: minimalist stripes ironically reduced to decorative detail. A magical act is depicted, and the performers appear in a circle or a square, and their instruments—the magician’s spread cape, the boxes in which he places his assistants, and most unforgettable of all the curved bodies of the female assistants—are conspicuously geometrical, that is, abstract. Perlis’s *The Jazz Singer; Astor Place* (1998), *Ninth Street*, and *Drummers* (both 1999) are eloquent formal constructions—geometrical tours de force in which rectangle and triangle seamlessly interlock, with some curves thrown in for good measure, as foils for the angles. Architecture is, indeed, a dynamically abstract construction. The geometrical tension is palpable in *Levitation*, 1998-99: the triangle of light and the circle in which a beautiful woman is suspended join forces to create a sense of geometrical drama. And also sexual drama, for coitus is symbolically represented: the beam of light penetrates the circle, and implicitly the woman.

Sexual magic permeates Perlis’s pictures, from the gender bender of the part female, part male figures in *Transformation* to the swords—each a kind of beam of light—the male magician thrusts into *Girl in the Box*, completely penetrating her. The drum is a female symbol—all the more so in *Drummers* because it is a pail, a classically Freudian female symbol—and in case our unconscious doesn’t get the point of the male drummers’ percussive activity, the diagonal of the subway roof in effect penetrates the female onlooker closest to him. In *The Jazz Singer; Astor Place* the subway has become the scene of revelry—indeed, almost a bacchanal—an altogether mythical scene, classical in import as the isocephalism of the figures implies. New York is full of surprises—of classical human truth. It cries out to be mythologized, and Perlis has done so with exquisite, ironical tact.

Clearly the magician is a surrogate for the artist, and clearly what he does has sexual import. He alone is active—a performer; he “operates” on his assistants, and more indirectly on the audience. It is the magic between performer—drummer, jazz singer as well as magician—and audience that interests Perlis. It is the transfer of erotic energy between them that makes the larger urban reality of which they are a part seem magical. Subliminal sexual excitement is an inescapable part of human relations, and it makes objective reality magical—subjectively significant. Indeed, the sexual coloring of reality is explicit in Perlis’s reds, sometimes vivid and strong, as in the magician’s clothing and the stage curtain, sometimes more delicate and subtle, as in the grand background building in *Drummers* and the body-hugging clothing of the female assistants. The problem of realism is how to convey emotional reality without denying objective reality—more precisely, how to use exterior reality to convey inner reality—and Perlis has ingeniously solved it. A sharp-eyed observer of the passing human scene, his works are also emotionally subtle and profound. Indeed, they convey the deep emotions lying just beneath the surface of everyday life.

They do something even more profound: they suggest that reality is a magical construction. Magicians are illusionists; their trick is to create an illusion of reality—to make the unreal seem real—to convince us that what is impossible is actual. They suggest just how tricky perception and reality are. The artist is an illusionist, and Perlis has created a grand illusion of reality, full of visual tricks that make it seem magical, which indicates how good an artist he is. If magical realism restores the balance between subject and object—it was lost in pursuit of pure art, which struggles to be independent of both, and to become a realm unto itself—by showing that both have the same reality, then Perlis is a major magical realist. Indeed, in conveying the inseparability of subject and object—which is what makes both magical—he reminds us that art becomes meaningless when it gives up all its illusions, becoming utterly unrealistic.

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