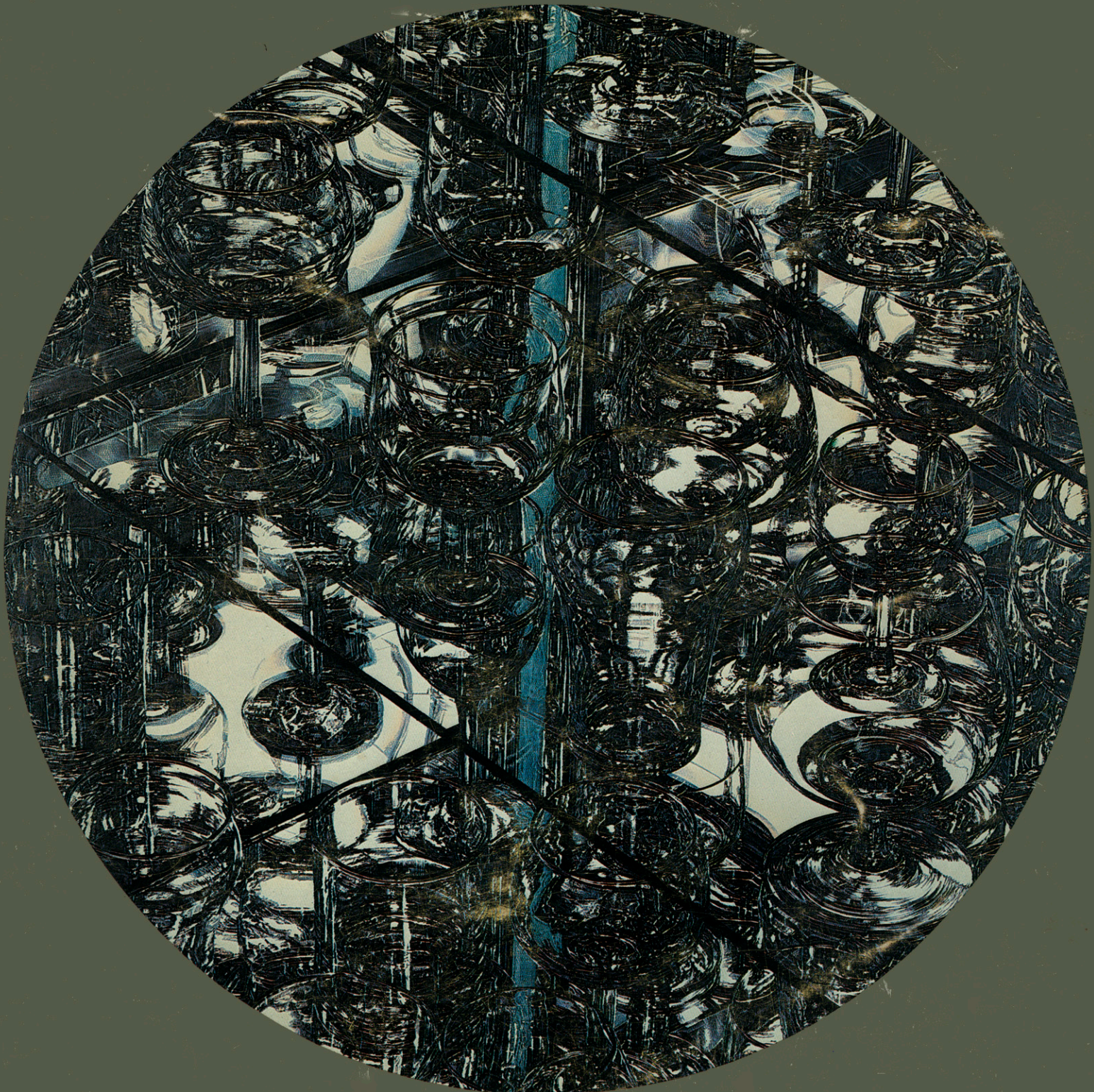

REAL, REALLY REAL, SUPER REAL

DIRECTIONS IN
CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN REALISM



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Exhibition Itinerary

San Antonio Museum of Art
San Antonio, Texas
March 1 - April 26, 1981
Indianapolis Museum of Art
Indianapolis, Indiana
May 19 - June 28, 1981
Tucson Museum of Art
Tucson, Arizona
July 19 - August 26, 1981
Museum of Art, Carnegie
Institute
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
October 24 - January 3, 1982

extensive context of the world beyond the represented segment of wooden floor. If a woman is to some degree imprisoned by domestic life and if floors, dishes, toys, and clothing dropped about on the ground are all part of her daily routine, she can still take advantage of her disadvantage by constructing an imagery of her experience. It may well be an imagery without a horizon, a claustrophobic sort of view, but it will be concrete, immediate, and authentic. Even her method of proceeding—methodically, systematically, undramatically—is reminiscent of folding laundry or knitting or even of washing a floor very carefully, and as such it is a strategy of painting that opposes itself to the explosive spontaneity, the immediate conquest of an entire surface



(21) Gustave Caillebotte, *Les raboteurs de parquet*, (The Floor-Scrapers), 1875. Oil on canvas, 40-1/8" X 59-1/4". Collection of the Louvre, Paris. Photograph courtesy the Louvre.

characteristic of a Jackson Pollock or a de Kooning. This procedure may well have its roots in a lived, or even a social, reality for a woman artist. Someone once said of Chardin in the eighteenth century that "nothing humiliates his brush." Today, one might transpose that statement by saying of a painter like Sylvia Mangold that nothing humiliates *her* brush and, even further, that she has created a consistent and convincing imagery from the humility that in a certain sense was thrust upon her.

Still, to return to contemporary realism generally, is it perhaps precisely this humility, this modesty of approach, this relatively



(22) Donald Perlis, *Chloe in the Afternoon*, 1974. Oil on canvas, 48" X 50". Collection of the artist. Photograph courtesy the artist.

cool neutrality of vision that looks at but rarely engages the total reality of this contemporary world that might be considered the most obvious lack or weakness of American realism today?

In attempting to avoid a sentimental or heroicizing attitude towards the working class, for example, perhaps to avoid being identified with the New Deal muralists of the thirties and their socially conscious imagery, contemporary American realists—with the notable exception of Jack Beal and his monumental yet highly original murals for the Labor Department in Washington—tend to ignore work and the working classes as such completely. Considered as images, from the viewpoint of a spectator deeply concerned not merely with the phenomenology of contemporary experience but with its quality as well, most of the painting of the new realists—however interesting, brilliant, or even sympathetic they may be as works of art—are all too often blighted by the kind of bad faith that weakens populist ideology itself, even populism of a

relatively sophisticated variety. For example, realist vision today makes an almost complete separation between private life—a cozy, privileged, shut-in area, such as that represented in Donald Perlis's *Chloe in the Afternoon* (1975)—and a depersonalized, often brutally reified public reality, such as the one depicted in Ralph Goings's *Rosebowl Parade* (1971). As an imaged ideology, modern realism tends, in contrast to that of Courbet in *The Burial at Ornans* (1849), for example, to deny the very possibility of a valid, shared social life, or even the existence of classes and groups—aside from the artist's own friends and relatives—with recognizable common interests in our all too simplistically denominated "consumer society." In concerning themselves so strenuously with details, surfaces, styles, and motifs of mass culture—even in attempting to neutralize their viewpoint by means of a kind of fictive banality—perhaps some of these realistic painters, like most of the rest of us, manage to avoid the more painful and demanding examination of the systems of power that mediate and sustain the styles and surfaces. And, at times, one senses a confusion of the mass culture of today with the folk culture of more traditional societies—a confusion of the false consciousness spread by the media with the taste of the people, a confusion of the willed lack of preconception of a self-styled objective vision with a truly analytic strategy of demystification on the part of both artists and audience. All of these criticisms may indeed be well taken. It may even be the case that the new realism acutely is the visual expression of a kind of unconscious latter-day populism presenting itself as an alternative, and a relatively radical one, to the more hermetic or elite modalities of abstraction, post-minimalism, or conceptual art.

Yet such criticisms would, on the whole, be only partial and in many ways unfair. New realist vision, at its best, is redeemed by its qualities of ambiguity, complexity, and tension in the face of modern reality. Without preaching, without being