

ROBERT RUSSELL

MASTERS

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Preface

Everything I Know I Know From Books

By Andrew Berardini

Trawling the long rows of books, each marked and placed, I would pace the libraries of my youth, fingers dragging, dancing over the spines, catching ever so slightly on the taped-on numbers and letters giving each their place in the stacks, nothing without a place. This is how I figured out the world or least what I could see through the chinks of books.

Like any person who reads too much, I'm endlessly consciously and unconsciously quoting bit of language. I'm not alone in this, most writers endlessly quote. William S. Burroughs told us language was a virus. We're only using words we know, the one's that infected us. It's a limited set all things told, but the combinations are endless.

Painting has many of the same problems and joys of writing. The materials are limited (for writers: letters, ink, paper; for painters: paint, canvas, brushes, stretcher bars), but both can through their simple materials craft anything that ever existed and perhaps more than a few things that did not. Painting does have the advantage over writing of being all at once, of being immediate and bracing like a good kiss, while writing generally needs a little more time and space to be fully experienced.

Robert Russell the painter has all the same problems as Andrew Berardini the writer. I set down to compose a sentence and all the other sentences ever read rush forward to be remembered, each strange word and poetical phrase jostles and calls for attention.

This essay is a pastiche of words, each one previously uttered by a greater writer than me, but I think I can, even in a recombination of other's words locate a new voice all my own. Each brushstroke by Russell is learned from somewhere. How can one make something new amidst the millennia of painting, and how can a writer say anything new within the epochs of writing from Gilgamesh to Shakespeare to Dickens to Pound and on?

Perhaps when Robert Russell the painter looks out onto the stacks of books, to the breadth of human knowledge and imagination, he looks not through words, but through the quotations of the masters that haunt him. Is he reducing their greatness to a simple, mass-produced book? Has that reduction already gone down within the canon of Art History? Less than it is an homage as it is a way to cycle through the language of painting, to pass from looking to making through seriality, a scenic view of a studio-bound object. Art history, adulatory obeisance, issues of mechanical reproduction, floating signifiers, projected value, the allure of well-wrought figuration, a joke on art-products, a dead pan quotation, perhaps all of the above, and though each book and its cover painting has been faithfully mimicked, they never stop being paintings by Robert Russell.

However influenced we are by those that came before, their brushstrokes and words infecting us, Robert Russell can't escape his own hand as a painter, as I, with any luck, will never be able to escape my own voice as a writer.