

# The Interiorized Image

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When a figurative artist projects, in paint on canvas, his or her innermost bodily sensations, the results are usually shocking. Certainly this is true of Bob Beauchamp's and Lucien Weinberger's work and of the paintings by Robert Henry and Juanita McNeely in Soho's Green Mountain and Prince Street Galleries, respectively, through February 12th.

Robert Henry calls his huge heads and figures Universal Self-Portraits and says that they "analogize inner feelings of the body, e.g., feelings of muscles, bones, breath, sound, pulse, pose, attitude and that indefinable quality we call spirit." The heads are focused on organs as receptors or openings channeling the exterior world into the body. The hollowness of the oral cavity, the barrier-like function of the teeth, the rigidity of the vertical tunnel that is the throat are all depicted as the artist is aware of them, while the brain space is usually left empty (because we can't feel it) or occupied by the "third eye" of the spirit.

Henry finds painted equivalents for man's never-ending battle against gravity in his large, standing figures. A total somatic sensation is conveyed: the figures seem to leap upward while standing still. Henry's other work—interiors, landscapes and observed figures—are often given a sense of movement, too, that makes it seem as though we are seeing the world from a speeding vehicle. *Head Over Heels Self-Portrait*, to me the finest painting in the show, is all somber greens and blacks highlighted by ghostly white and yellow accents. It contains a single figure crouching near the middle of the tall canvas with two foot steps where the knees would have been and where the feet would have been had the figure been standing so as to completely fill the space. We are aware of the weight, density and relative importance of the pelvic region because the upper torso and limbs and the head are broken up into transparent planes that blur or bleed off into the surrounding space.

On the other hand, the elongated vertical format of these, Henry's most recent paintings, partially

solves some of the problems he faces dealing with this kind of imagery. Because he is looking inward instead of observing outside reality, he automatically has a bilaterally symmetrical image to figure-ground dichotomy to ameliorate. The narrow format helps to mitigate a gestalt reading as does his new tendency to emphasize the figure's central core at the expense of its outermost contours. Breaking the figure up around the edges to weave it into the ground and allowing the ground to wash over the figure counteracts a three-dimensional reading. So too does his new smoothed down surface, which is both hard and flat and open to receiving transparent planes as they fan out from the figure.

Robert Henry has been a consummate handler of loose, painterly surfaces for many years. The new toughness of his surface goes hand-in-hand with his fully realized subject matter. It's been an arduous struggle, but now, especially in the three tall, larger-than-life figures and in some of the more stripped-down heads, he's gotten to a place where no one's been before. Exploring unfamiliar territories must be frightening as well as exhilarating. It is both things for the viewer.

A comparison with Francis Bacon's paintings might seem obviously called for in the context of Henry's and Juanita McNeely's work but the basic differences among them are more crucial than their superficial similarities. Bacon's images look like distortions of carefully observed reality rather than like raw material, unconsciously created and semi-automatically expressed. Bacon's paintings always seem consciously wrought and precisely executed, with every painterly passage placed on the canvas with painstaking accuracy. To my mind, Bob Henry's paintings would be impossible without the experience of Abstract Expressionism.