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An interview with Jacob Collins

by David Yezzi

TNC's David Yezzi talks with the painter about his life, his work, and the world of figurative art.

Editor's note: This autumn, David Yezzi, The New Criterion*'s Executive Editor, interviewed the realist painter Jacob Collins in his studio on Manhattan's Upper East Side.*

TNC: You are the great-nephew of Meyer Schapiro?

COLLINS: Yes, my mother's uncle was Meyer Schapiro; that makes him my great-uncle.

TNC: Did you know him at all? Was he at family gatherings?

COLLINS: Yes, I saw him mostly at family events. I didn't know him *super* well, but I saw him regularly. When I got a little older, I would talk to him and show him my drawings. He had, you know, his famous eye, and he would notice things that, later on, I would think about and recognize were interesting things to have noticed.

TNC: When you started drawing, who were your influences? Now, we look at your work, and we see a realist painter who is coming out of Eakins, in the American tradition, or the Hudson River School. Were you immediately drawn to those kinds of pictures, or did you explore other styles on your way to that?

COLLINS: Well, when I was young (it was probably right around 1976), my drawing enthusiasm was directed towards drawing big sailing ships. That was the year of Operation Sail [in New York Harbor], so probably a lot of kids at that time were drawing big sailing ships. For a while, my older brother and I drew these sailing ships. We had a lot of books growing up in which paintings and images of old ships appeared—I guess my father or mother must have got them.

There were a lot of paintings by Willem van de Velde, Fitz Henry Lane, and Salomon van Ruysdael, the uncle of the famous Jacob van Ruysdael. I was a little kid, eleven or twelve years old, but I spent a lot of time looking at these paintings. Shortly after that, I was copying Leonardo and Rubens and Raphael and Michelangelo—the chalk drawings and the line drawings and all those

silver-point drawings. It felt very much like a continuum.

TNC: Many twentieth-century painters studied the Old Masters very carefully, copying them and learning from them. They then took compositional ideas, or color, or whatever it was and incorporated it into a modernist expression. Was that ever anything you were drawn to do?

COLLINS: I never wanted to do that, no. There was a lot of pressure, friendly pressure mostly to do just what you said. I guess I saw modernism—postwar American modernism and between-the-wars Paris modernism, and Impressionism and Post-Impressionism before that—as art styles. That's all I thought they were, but they were presented to me as universal truths, as the destiny of Western civilization. I saw them instinctively, not to be condescending, as directions in the fashion of art that weren't the direction that I wanted.

TNC: You felt that those were paintings that you didn't engage with.

COLLINS: I have to admit that, yes, I didn't engage them. I didn't care about them, although once in a while I would see something that felt, you know, that it was aesthetically better. There was a while when I felt that I had to be against modernism, just because it was so oppressive. I spent so much of my time defending myself for not embracing it. I'm not really interested in doing that anymore. I'm not saying that I think modernism is particularly legitimate, but it's not my problem. I'm sort of back where I started.

TNC: Could you sketch out a trajectory for the fortunes of realism? Am I right in thinking that it really fell off after the French Academy in the nineteenth century? Isn't Bouguereau the one that everybody throws out as being the kitschy, horrible end of the Academic tradition, and thank God modernism came and swept all of that away?

COLLINS: I feel like that is some kind of retardataire thing to say. It feels so 1950s, just picking Bouguereau, I guess. But yes, that's high modernism—that's Greenberg right there. Here's what I think happened. I'm very interested in Greenberg, and not as a bad guy. He was my big villain, my arch villain; now I just see him, obviously, as very, very brilliant, but missing something really significant.

One big idea of his, it seems to me, is that artists we would consider Academic realists, before maybe around 1850 or 1860, are legitimate, and the Academic artists after that time are illegitimate. His idea was that the Academic tradition by that point had become a hollowed-out husk, that historical and cultural changes had destroyed it. Ironically, for a Marxist, which he generally was, he had an extraordinarily elitist view. At first, there was this balanced world between patron and artist, where there was a great deal of sophistication that had evolved over many centuries. Greenberg's idea is that these late-Academic artists start producing fake versions. He uses a lot of interesting language, like ersatz, or simulacrum, words like that. The works are devoid of the actual life, but they're like candy to Greenberg's petit-bourgois, who have become ironmongers and made money, then came milling into the big salons and started buying these things.

This is the period that you asked about, the "Bouguereau period." Greenberg's idea is that the true spirits (I describe this in such depth because it feels significant) believed they had to flee to higher ground. This debased crowd of one-generation-ago peasants, who were stripped of their folk traditions and trying to connect to the classical tradition, are being given something else. The work has been produced by artificial means or mechanical means. They're given the fake, ersatz version, and they love it.

The artists who realized it was fake wanted to retrieve an essence that was in the earlier art, to only have that. And so that's what the Post-Impressionists were drawing out of the painting tradition, extracting the true essence. This was the modernist distillation: "We're going to find universal abstractions and pull away from the toxic cycle of audience and purveyor."

TNC: But was Greenberg wrong in his formulation?

COLLINS: Yes, I think so. Here's what I think happened. The first photograph was in 1839, and for about twenty years after that it was still very hard to make one. You had to be a professional photographer or have your own little chemistry lab. You could get one done in a shop, but to have a photo studio in your art studio was not an easy thing to do. After the box camera was invented in 1870 or so, there was the proliferation of photography throughout the culture. At that point, you start to get the absolute, wanton use of photographs for drawing purposes. After that, nobody ever again learns how to draw.

My feeling is that what Greenberg is responding to is the fact that all of the Academic art—almost all of the realism—was done from photography from around 1870 on (and even including the Impressionists, by the way!). When I recently reread "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," seeing it through this prism, I kept on waiting for the paragraph where he dropped in photography as the issue, but he doesn't. He keeps on talking about the subject as if he were [thinking of photography]! The whole canon of modernist art history delegitimizes traditional realism after 1860 or 1870 and champions it before then. I think what happened was that in that period there was an unwillingness to fight the fight that needed to be fought—against the replacement of classical drawing by the photograph—and so this avant-garde thing swept away the entire form. I think it's unfortunate that these painters fled. They abandoned the traditions of painting to these artists whom they felt were cons.

TNC: And today?

COLLINS: My thought really is this: an artist's aesthetic is really the product of his studio practices—that's what defines the art form. It's what you do in a very particular way. And I think something that happened with art during that time was this idea that the job of art is to get some other job done, to express humanity or to express yourself or the Zeitgeist. Those are fine things, and every art, every cultural form should do those things, but with all other forms the understanding is primarily that their first job is the successful practice of the form itself. And what

the form is, for me, is defined by the practice.

TNC: This leads to my next question. You've devoted a lot of energy to teaching painting and drawing. Is your thought that it's not just about passing along the techniques, but it's also about creating a space where this practice exists?

COLLINS: It's the art form. Here's one thing that people say about using photographs: "It's just a tool. You should use all the tools . . . whatever tools there are you should use. You need to do this job and you want to do it as well as you can and you use all the tools." That then connects to the Old Masters, who used all the tools in the toolbox, any tools in their toolbox they would have used—that's a perfectly fine argument.

What I would say is this: They didn't have the tools, and that's why they invented the form they invented. It would be a little bit like saying that you're deeply into kung fu, and you love kung fu so much. You revere its form, its practitioners, and its history. You show up at your kung fu match, and you're watching the guy you think is so great. Then some other guy shows up, and he pulls out a revolver and he shoots your guy, and you say, "What the hell are you doing?" He says, "Well, I won, didn't I?" You say, "Well, that wasn't kung fu!" And he says, "Come on, it's just the tools, and I'm using all the tools at my disposal."

It's a ridiculous example, but you might say then "You can't just bring this in." They might say "Well, you're so hidebound, caught up in your idea of what rules are; you need to let go and use whatever tools are at your disposal." You say "That's ridiculous, that's not kung fu." Then they might say "Look, the inventors of kung fu (whoever they were, probably historical people) would have used the gun if they'd had it," and they would have. That's a perfectly valid argument. What they were trying to do was defeat another guy. At that point you have to say, "What is it I love?" I don't love beating the other guy up. I love the practice of the form, and the way that the guy I think is so great practices the form.

If someone wants to do kung fu with guns, he could certainly develop a new form, say, gun fu, that has its own set of virtues. And if the entire world starts practicing this new form, and I want to appreciate somebody who does it in the older way, than somebody might say, "Oh, you're so old-fashioned, that's so antiquarian." Well, that's fine by me; that's just fine. It's the particular form I want, and it's the thing I love.

You look at the people—you mentioned Eakins—who were using photographs, but still it felt like they were practicing this form. I would say that they had already matured as artists, through working from the hand and the mind and the eye, without the photograph. It created an aesthetic. It would be very hard for someone to do that now, because the art culture was still connected to the older practices. It no longer is. Your practices create your aesthetic.

So, for instance, in calligraphy the broad-nibbed pen will create the aesthetic, and calligraphers will make those shapes that they've made for hundreds of years from using that tool. A person might

come along and start creating calligraphy on the computer, and my guess would be that if a person had spent thirty years spacing and creating the calligraphy with a pen, he would be able to carry across that handmade aesthetic to some extent, but over time the computer would form a new aesthetic.

TNC: Just to throw a wrench into the mix: What about Philip Pearlstein, who paints from the model, never used photographs. There are many ways in which his practices are very similar to yours (though obviously he's not using old master techniques).What's the difference?

COLLINS: Oh, gosh, you know, it's so hard. It feels different. It feels like in some philosophical way he's more thinking about modernism. He's relating to modernism. I don't know enough about what he thinks.

TNC: Were there other painters doing what you were doing when you started?

COLLINS: When I was young I was coming at the tail end of a very stretched tradition. There was a sense that there's modernism, which is this big enormous, multi-headed beast, and then there was traditionalism, which didn't really have any practitioners as far as I could find (I gradually found a couple here and there, and there were little traces of people around). And then there was illustration, and it was big and healthy. When I was coming up, a lot of people in my position wanted to do drawing and painting in realism, and they felt so beat up by their art school that they would switch to the illustration department.

TNC: And they would work for magazines and newspapers?

COLLINS: The illustrators would feel very much (and with good reason) that they could draw, and that they were the real heirs. The question is, Who is the real heir to the old pre-modern world? It's interesting; there were different forkings-off. I very much felt I didn't want to go [the illustration route]. I didn't want to do that, because it didn't look like what I wanted in an emotional way. I admired something about it, but I didn't go down that road. It wasn't where I was headed.

TNC: Which way did you head?

COLLINS: So, I jumped into a revival of traditional painting, which was very much under assault by establishment modernists of all different sorts. Whether they were more post-Warhol postmodernists or old-fashioned New York School Hoffmann modernists, they all felt that I was barking up the wrong tree, and they were sometimes very aggressive and disdainful.

So there I was, and there were these illustration programs. Maybe I had been influenced a lot, because I spent time at the Studio School and there was Meyer Schapiro and my [painter] grandmother with her Matisse and all. I'm sure I saw some quality in the illustration that fell into—and this sounds so bad—that fell into the category of Greenberg's kitsch.

On the other hand, I didn't particularly hold that against it. I just figured: it is what it is, these people are professionals, they do what they do, and I admire them. It doesn't mean that you can't think it's great for what it is, but it wasn't what I wanted to do.

TNC: And then there was a revival of traditional realism, of which you were a major part.

COLLINS: Well, I show up in the late 1980s, and there were other people who were showing up. I found friends, fellow students, and it started to happen, little bits here and there. Art schools were founded around that time, like Dan Graves and Charles Cecil's in Florence. They started that school, and it's now a big burgeoning scene with all these competing schools.

And then in the early 1990s I started to show, and people started to look at me—not people in the lofty heights of the art world, but other young artists started to think, "Wow, that's a viable thing! You can make paintings like that and sell them in galleries." People started to come around and get interested and excited in what I was doing and started to lift it up a little bit. Now, at the very same time, the world of illustration just practically died, just died dead on its back.

TNC: Why? What do you mean?

COLLINS: I don't know why, exactly, but my wife was working in publishing at the time. She worked at a children's book company that produced around 140 books a year. They'd hire painters to paint the covers. I would drop in there, and there would be painters, illustrators showing up with paintings constantly: pastels, watercolors, oil paintings. During that time, sometime in the mid-1990s, they switched over to having covers with just plain type or Photoshopped photographs. A lot of it had to do with the fact that paintings just felt old-fashioned for book covers, and even kids didn't want to buy them. It felt like the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew—old-fashioned—and they wanted to have a cool photograph.

Until then, all the movies were advertised with paintings. There was a painting for *Star Wars*, there was a painting for everything. I'm not an expert in the field, but from what I saw, there ware a whole lot of out-of-work illustrators all of a sudden. They just showed up, and they were exhibiting traditional-looking paintings done from photographs. A lot of them had seen themselves primarily as fine artists all along and felt they were just doing the illustration to pay the bills. I'm not disputing their legitimacy as artists. But there was a merger of the old illustration world, which needed a new identity, and the traditional revivalism world, which was still very small. It was a classic political marriage of convenience, where two different groups, whose values don't completely overlap, make common cause. Both the illustrators and traditional painters had always felt like they were suffering horribly under this oppressive regime of twentieth-century modernism. They felt like kindred spirits, and I remember thinking at the time "Hey, why *don't* we, you know? This really makes sense." And a lot of things happened in the last fifteen years to solidify that identity.

TNC: Did it make sense in the end, this alliance?

COLLINS: Now, I'm looking back and thinking that it's more complicated than I realized. Let's say all the traditional revivalists are rowing a rowboat across the Atlantic Ocean in the middle of the winter. (Whatever happened that left us in this rowboat is lost in the mists of time.) Suddenly, this gigantic Cunard cruise liner just crashes and goes under. There are ten thousand illustrators swimming for the boat, and the first couple you're like "Hey, get on board! We got this great thing going on here! We're reviving classical art!" The identity of twentieth-century American illustration, as defined by its studio practices, became inseparably blended in the marketplace and in almost everyone's understanding with the art form I had been pursuing. It makes me feel again, thirty years later (though in a different way), that I don't have a home.

TNC: And going forward?

COLLINS: The aesthetic that arose from those old studio practices can still be approached laterally by the use of photography. Inevitably, though, the new practices lead to a new aesthetic. For me, after a very short time (and it's happening fast), those pictures look more and more photo-ey. It's not something that I could even say is a bad thing. It's interesting: it relates to magazine ads. It feels modern; it feels like a traditionalist postmodernism. It doesn't have that sort of stuffy feeling that I love so much, that stodgy, old-fashioned, awkward humanism. It feels like it's sort of snappier, and I can see why a lot of people like it. I can see why a lot of collectors like it and why a lot of dealers want to really go with it.

You need to be in a place where people are evaluating what you do based on what you do. That's why it matters to me so much—and not just me. I think about my students and my friends. I feel sometimes that the very essence of what I do and why it's any good (if it's any good) isn't going to be picked up by people whose values are constantly being formed and reformed by a new practice that occupies the same space [in the art world].

TNC: Yes, I see what you mean. But, even so, you are established, you have created a number of schools, your work is sought after and appreciated. What are you looking forward to working on?

COLLINS: In my own work? You know, I had a show recently that was successful and sold paintings. I'm loving working with Adelson Galleries. It was the first time in a long time I felt like I had a New York show with real support from dealer, patrons, and critics. I'm in a good spot, and I just love drawing and painting.

TNC: And you're doing seascapes, is that right?

COLLINS: I was out at the beach a lot over this summer, and I was painting there. These [on the wall] were painted in the studio from a lot of studies and memory. I've got some figures that I'm working on. I'm working on a self-portrait. I painted a lot of self-portraits a long time ago, and then I didn't anymore. Then I started to try again, and I found it much harder. I found myself to be much more uncertain about myself. When I was younger, I was happy with a brazen, youthful energy, to try to look the way I wanted. Now, I feel like staring at myself . . . it's hard. I'm doing a

sort of smallish one that I hope to finish next week, and then I want to do a big one where I really do it.

TNC: Is it that you are getting older?

COLLINS: I think I'm getting maybe a little more philosophical when I look at myself. There you are looking at yourself, and you're much more self-critical in deeper ways. The funny thing about a self-portrait is: I'm always looking at my work and having a roller coaster of, you know, "This is great. . . . Oh, this is awful." There's a lot of anxiety about whether I'm doing something that's really beautiful or really successful or powerful. And then, with the self-portrait, the problem is that I'm looking at the work and I'm judging myself, as well. I'm looking at the guy who did it. And so, when I'm feeling like "This is just awful, what horrible person would make something as debased and stupid-looking as this," and then there he is! [*laughs*] So, I find that hard. It creates an echo-chamber of self-loathing at its worst.

TNC: Which wasn't as complex when you were younger?

COLLINS: You know, it didn't cross my mind. I had a lot of rage at my own inability to be as good as I wanted. I was trying to scale this mountain of skills and it upset me a lot of the time. I mean, generally I'm pretty cheerful, but I do get very caught up in whether I'm pulling it off, in the question of "Does this have value? Does this have that deepest feeling?"

David Yezzi is former Poetry Editor of *The New Criterion*. His most recent book, *More Things in Heaven: New and Selected Poems*, is forthcoming from Measure Press.

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