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Falling off: memories of Clem

by Pat Lipsky

On the famous modernist critic.

Editors' note: This piece is adapted from the forthcoming memoir MERCER GREENE WOOSTER: A Life in Art, *by Pat Lipsky.*

It was around two in the afternoon, and I was walking down East Eighty-second Street towards the Met. Coming in the opposite direction I saw a man around my height who looked to be in his early seventies. I thought maybe it was the art critic Clement Greenberg, whom I'd met a few times before, first at André Emmerich Gallery in the late Sixties, and then more recently at Bennington College where he'd given a series of lectures. As we got closer, I saw it was him.

"Mr. Greenberg," I said, "hi, how are you?"

"The same," he answered. (I learned later he always gave that answer, implying nothing had really improved in the art world.)

Greenberg was wearing a soiled orange parka that came down below his hips and one of those English checked wool-and-tweed walking caps. "How are *you*, Pat? And please call me Clem," he said.

"I will," I responded. "I'm okay, living uptown now, painting."

In truth, this was a low moment for both of us. Since I'd attended his Bennington lectures a few years earlier, the only positive thing to happen was my son David's return to live with me in New York. Meanwhile my painting career needed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. People I'd known just a few years before crossed to the other side of the street when they saw me. But perhaps that was going to change now, because standing right in front of me was this famous art critic—and he was holding his ground.

It wasn't the greatest time for him, either. After his criticism had dominated the New York art world for over three decades, a new group of figurative artists had come in: Julian Schnabel with his plates, David Salle with his porn in black and white, plus some Italian artists who painted wild animals and smeared distorted figures onto canvas. The advent of these new artists had pushed modernism and the formalists with whom Greenberg was identified aside. His daughter, a student at Vassar, had reported back to Clem her art history professor's evaluation: "Greenberg," he said, "has been finished for ten years." (Making *his* falling-off date 1972.) Clem's advice to her was, "Don't say anything. You never defend a relative."

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Over his four-decade career Greenberg had acquired many enemies—artists to whom he'd told the truth about their work and fellow critics whose writing he'd disparaged. Now, with this changing of the guard, the antagonists were crawling out of the woodwork to denounce him publicly.

"What did you see at the museum, Clem?" I asked.

He replied, " 'France in the Golden Age,' curated by that guy from the Louvre, Pierre Rosenberg. It had some good things, but, damn, the pictures were hung too close together. Listen, Pat, I'd like to see what you're doing. Why don't you send me some slides?"

"Okay, great. I will," I said.

Clem tore a piece of paper from his notepad and wrote down his address in Norwich, New York. (He'd left the city a few years before to live in the country full time. Perhaps this move was to avoid the current art-world situation?)

Back home I looked at slides of my recent pictures. My photographer had shot them a few weeks before. At the time they'd looked fine, but now in light of this new development, they weren't holding up. The accompanying note would be delicate to write. Any wrong phrase or presumptuous remark could jeopardize this fragile beginning. I asked a writer friend to help, and we came up with something passable. The next day I mailed off a large tan envelope to Norwich.

Then the waiting, something I wasn't good at. Finally about a month later a light-green envelope appeared. On the same color stationery, his typed letter was short and to the point: "In the main, from what I can see in the slides you are doing high art."

High art: even then it was a dated term, the pendulum having swung from pure modernism to turgid figuration. Still I was jubilant. It was a phrase so redolent of T. S. Eliot.

In 1971 I was living in the godforsaken town of Hoosick Falls near the Vermont–New York border with my then-husband and our two small children. It was the year after my initial art-

world success. Seventy-one paintings of mine had sold at Emmerich Gallery. It was my husband who decided we had to leave New York. He wanted to become a writer. (Writer or painter, all you needed was the time, so you could just quit your day job and try.) Instead, the town became the morgue of our marriage, the end of our small family.

But there was one tiny positive thing: on a poster somewhere I'd read that the art critic Clement Greenberg would be giving five lectures at Bennington College. The first night I was stunned to hear Greenberg say, "Everything Robert Rauschenberg does is safe, easy, and conventional. His work is so mediocre. It's all about iconography, the Kennedys, Michelangelo, whose finger is touching whose." For the previous nine years I'd only heard raves about Rauschenberg, as if he were the new Picasso. It started in college with my art-history professor who also doubled as a curator at the Jewish Museum. Professor Solomon sent me to see Rauschenberg's *Monogram* (the goat with tire). I hated it, and also the picture *Canyon*, which had a dead bird glued to its surface. (What if the eagle fell off while you were looking?) After the initial shock—"Oh, look, a dead bird on a painting, a goat with a tire in a museum!"—there was nothing to look at.

Clem spoke to perceptions I'd had for years. We saw eye to eye on many things, like how trivial and boring both Pop Art and minimalism were.

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He told me that as a young man he'd tried writing poetry. And that he could draw photographically. But in college his art came into conflict with literature and philosophy. When, in the late Forties, he finally gave himself over to art criticism, it was as if Ernest Hemingway were writing the reviews. Clem was dazzling in conversation, weighing every word, and, if necessary, circling back to correct something he'd said earlier, "I was wrong there, I should have said . . ." I'd never met anyone as smart.

Later, I was teaching at a college in Connecticut and invited Clem to lecture there. Six years before, he'd given a talk at the nearby Wadsworth Atheneum from which the town was still recovering. I'd been in the audience that evening. "Trendiness came in," he said, "when the standards in art became avant-gardist. . . . After Pollock. . . the best new art was supposed to shock. . . . What was required were spectacular effects. . . . Now the ticket to admission, to a place in art, has to be won by shock." And then his evaluation of the Tremaine Collection, about which he'd been invited to speak: "The Tremaine Collection," Clem said, "is a document to trendiness." There were gasps from the audience, and the Tremaines simply got up and walked out of the auditorium.

His lecture, and the meetings with my art students, were free of shock value. He seemed energized by the questions they kept asking. Afterwards we went for drinks. I'd invited an old friend of Clem's, the director of a New Haven museum, to join us. We arrived at the restaurant at the

appointed 9 p.m., but the director was nowhere in sight. Finally, at 10:30, the director and his blonde, frizzy-haired date arrived. As he and Clem spoke about art and gossip, the dynamic heated up. Then Clem asked a question about a contemporary sculptor they both knew and the director stopped the conversation, making it clear he didn't want to continue talking. Clem leaned across the table and said, "The trouble with you, Steven, is you don't have enough opinions."

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The next day Clem and I drove back from Hartford, me at the wheel. I'd done the drive a million times, but having him in the passenger seat changed everything. What if, like Michel Gallimard—the scion of the famous French publishing house whose passenger one bleak January day had been Albert Camus—I crashed the car? The art world was rife with car deaths, from Jackson Pollock to David Smith.

Clem had a date for every painter, sculptor, poet (he thought the word "artist" was pretentious). This was the moment when they had "fallen off." For Rothko, 1955; Ad Reinhardt, that same bad year. (The way I learned this was pure Clem. I was at moma—the big central escalator gave it the feel of a mall visit—for the Reinhardt retrospective. The pictures he did in the first half of the Fifties looked very strong to me. I called Clem from a museum pay phone: "How come Reinhardt is so good between 1950 and 1955?" Clem answered, "Oh that's when he was friendly with Rothko. After that Rothko dropped him.")

With Paul Klee, the bad year was 1930, "when he started using thick black outlines," Clem said. Picasso was clear until 1918, after which "he never did a good painting." T. S. Eliot, the publication year of *The Waste Land*, 1922. Clem squinted above a thick exhale from his Camel, as if looking back across the years of disappointed production. Eliot had lost his stuff. On Van Gogh, the years were 1885–88, the era of *Shoes* and *The Potato Eaters*. The portraits especially "had too much paint and were not good." For Pollock, whom Clem singled out early on as the most important Abstract Expressionist, the cutoff was 1951. It amused Clem when at Pollock's 1951 show—the first not to succeed—people kept coming up to him and saying, "At last I get what you see in Pollock."

I memorized these falling-off dates and couldn't help thinking the idea obsessed Clem because he, too, had fallen off. He attributed his non-writing then to writer's block, which I took as a generic term to mean he had ceased exerting any control over his schedule. What Clem did all day was see friends, read philosophy, and visit exhibitions, with his scowling instant discernment. He was nearing eighty.

He entered museum lobbies with a slow, pokey walk: this small bald man, as if he'd just gotten off a horse after decades in the saddle.

The last piece he wrote was about Clyfford Still. The Abstract Expressionist's best pictures had been verticals. Clem wrote that the reason Still could only succeed in this format was because "he couldn't be alone with himself long enough to go horizontal." This was the kind of remark he made, an insight you just never could have come up with yourself, immediately right and opening up more doors at the same time. And funny, too. But funny in a particularly strong way. It was funny without asking you to laugh.

He also told me why he'd gone into art criticism in the first place. Early on, he'd been writing for *Partisan Review*, with its great group of New York Intellectuals: Dwight Macdonald, Hannah Arendt, Irving Howe, Philip Rahv, and others. In this group Clem was just another brilliant writer. He said, "I knew I'd stand out more in the art world because there just aren't that many smart people in the field. At *Partisan Review* I had a lot of competition." So, focusing on being an art critic had been a business decision. Like his father, Clem was a very good businessman.

He told me about the Pollock–de Kooning split—that de Kooning and a lot of hangers on thought Pollock was out of it, too awkward, too difficult, and that they'd banded together around the more accessible, movie star–like de Kooning. He called the painter Adolph Gottlieb a "pants presser." He didn't approve of Rothko killing himself in a bathtub. "All that blood others were left to find and clean up," he said.

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One time, I finally couldn't take it anymore. Exasperated, I asked, "Who *did* you like, Clem?"

"I liked Pollock sober," he answered.

Pollock Sober? At first I thought it was someone's name, some obscure painter only he knew about. But no, Clem meant Pollock when he wasn't drinking. He also mentioned that he'd written a book about Jackson and Lee's relationship. He'd spent a great deal of time in the 1950s with the two of them. But ultimately he decided "it wasn't fit for publication."

As well as being brilliant, Clem had this marvelous air of detachment. Perhaps it came from reading the Bhagavad Gita, which he took out of his coat pocket a few times while I was with him. "Subway reading," he called it. Or maybe he had cultivated "disinterestedness" because it went along with his aesthetic theory coming out of Immanuel Kant.

He had great expressions to back up his ideas, expressions I still use. My favorite came up when Clem assigned blame for something he didn't like. He'd say, "It's the taste that permits it." This meant that if someone wanted to do something ridiculous or awful or crude or mad, that was that

person's prerogative. For instance let me paraphrase his assessment of Vito Acconci masturbating under the raised floorboards of Sonnabend Gallery in 1972: that was fine, and probably a fun way for Acconci to spend those hours. But it was the people who would say it was art who were the problem. You look at a Paul Klee, you get a feeling: it sets your imagination free. You listen to Vito bringing himself off: you knew it was a blow against the squares. It was easier and simpler to have an opinion on these things. The inherent risk went away, and taste was supplanted by positions. It was the taste that *permitted* it, that went along with it, that even sponsored it. It was the taste that was to blame, the taste that couldn't, or didn't know how to say, "No." Taste that was both unformed and permissive.

When something was said that he found "off," his comeback would be: "That shows you don't hang around with the right people." (Because the right people would have clued you in.) To do successful work, he'd whittled it down to "Just make a rule and then stick to it" or "Bear down more. The trouble is you don't bear down enough."

He even had a rule about viewing pictures. One day I bumped into him in front of a small Fra Angelico crucifixion at the Met. He was standing pretty close to it. "Every picture has its own viewing distance," he said. "It's up to the viewer to find it." You have to look at the picture to know.

And for color: "You can make any picture work if the color is good enough." He also thought that people who could see color were special, mystical, and somehow found each other. For judging art he maintained, "you have to go picture by picture." That's the whole thing. For life too.

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Clem talked a lot about major and minor. When he threw those terms around we, the painters and sculptors who knew him, were all just shaking. Everybody wanted to be major; no one could stand the thought of being minor. But a few years later I realized, "Wait, minor's not that bad. Minor's okay." You could get in; you might get into some wing at the Met. Maybe. Like Raphaelle Peale or George Bellows. Cynthia Ozick mentions the same thing in her essay "Alfred Chester's Wig." The question there was: "Will Alfred Chester even be considered minor?" One time in conversation Clem admitted, "I'd settle for being 'minor.' Hopper is minor, he's too safe."

If you started getting too specific, immediately he'd say, "Don't explain." Once I was telling him what had inspired a picture, my thoughts at the time. "Cut the soundtrack," he said: "In art the only thing that matters is the result."

When I was hanging out with him from the early 1980s until his death in 1994, I hadn't fallen off. I still had years ahead of me, which could be influenced by everything I had learned from Clem and

what he said about my paintings. Maybe, like Leda in Yeats's version of Greek mythology, I could "put on his knowledge with his power."

There was the night he talked about the great topic of flatness. He was constantly quoted about the "ineluctable flatness of the picture plane"—stating that for a contemporary abstract painting to succeed, to "work," it had to maintain the tension inherent in its two-dimensionality. The concept initially came out of his study of Kant. In painting, this self-aware, self-critical aspect had to do with proclaiming what it shared with no other art—*flatness*.

We were in his Manhattan living room when he brought up the topic. Dusk was falling, and with it the light dying over the sliver of Hudson visible from his window.

"Maybe I overdid it with flatness," he said: "It wasn't that important."

I was *stunned*. This was the cornerstone of his approach to Modernism, and here he was questioning what had set the course of American painting for decades.

"Really? You think that? But it's completely identified with your name. It's your main premise—Greenberg and flatness," I protested.

"Yeah, well I wish I could retract it now," he said. "Or at least make less of it. The press has made too much of it."

No doubt he could have called someone, some art-critic type who would have been delighted to report this change to *ARTNews*, *Art in America*, or, for Christ's sake, *The New York Times*. There were others who had renounced theories in their later years. But he didn't do that.

When he visited my apartment, I'd drive my Toyota to his place over on Central Park West and pick him up. Then we'd drive back to my apartment on West End Avenue. I liked walking with him through the brazenly mirrored lobby of my building, even though no one knew who he was.

Slowly we'd go through my large pictures—huge, really, in relation to the room's proportions—and Clem would home in on the area that had given me trouble. "The green is not working," he'd say. Or "I can tell you were trying too hard in that passage." And he'd point.

The last time I saw him was at the apartment on Central Park West after he'd broken his hip. I came early on a Tuesday and was ushered into his bedroom, a room I'd never been in before. I remember the bright-yellow sheets, which brought to mind the Hotel d'Alsace and Oscar Wilde's last yellow wallpaper.

"Hello," I said, "how are you?"

"Not that great," he answered.

“I know,” I said. “This must really be a drag.”

To change the topic he asked me, “What are you doing? Are you going back to Paris this summer?”

I replied, “Yeah, I’m going in a couple weeks. I’m not staying in the Sixteenth this time. I’ll be in the Fourteenth, Montparnasse.”

“Oh, that’s fine,” he said. “You’ll like it. You should look up my friend Anne Sinclair.”

“Is she French?” I asked. “It doesn’t sound like a French name.”

“Yes, she is,” he said. “She worked on translating *Art and Culture*, into French. Actually she’s Paul Rosenberg’s granddaughter. You know the building on Seventy-ninth where Salander-O’Reilly is? That used to be the Rosenberg Gallery. He was Matisse’s dealer.”

He gave me her address and phone number. Then he directed me to a closet in the bedroom: “Go to the back, on the right. That’s where I keep the maps. There’s a map in there of Paris.”

I fumbled around and found it.

“Take it with you,” he said. “It’s good on the arrondissements.”

As I walked to the door of his bedroom to let myself out, he added, “I have always enjoyed your company.” And that was it. Ten years of near–hero worship over. The rest of my life ahead of me.

What kept him going through the thin Eighties and the Nineties was his belief that the best art would stand the test of time. Warhol would be known to future generations for what he was: a showman and impresario, *not* a great painter. But it occurs to me now that, so far, Clem himself has *not* stood the test of time. I seem to be the only person still talking about him. It’s like I’m standing on the shore, and the boat that is the art world is way, way off in the distance. No one has replaced him—not in New York and not for me. Clem is the only person I’ve ever known who stood for something.

Pat Lipsky is a painter and writer based in New York. Her work is represented in twenty-eight public collections, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Gardens, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Harvard Art Museum.

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