

About Face

BY LEAH OLLMAN



Tony Scherman: Chet Baker, 2001, 41 1/2 inches square. Private collection. Paintings this spread from the "Blue Highway" series.

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In his "Blue Highway" series, ongoing since 1998, Scherman paints portraits of celebrities worn thin by the camera's attention. Greta Garbo, Kurt Cobain, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Miles Davis, Chet Baker, Grace Kelly—each suffered the pressures of fame and what Scherman characterizes as "metaphysical anxiety." Some were depressive, some addicted to drink or drugs; several committed suicide. These are the kind of characters Scherman

Tony Scherman's paintings have such carnal presence that their internal contradictions register only secondarily, gradually injecting the viewer's sensual reverie with complexity and doubt. Scherman, who lives in Toronto, has two bodies of work currently touring North America—"Chasing Napoleon" and "The Blue Highway." In both, tightly cropped portraits of historical and cultural figures stare out bracingly from vigorously painted encaustic surfaces. The results are surprising, counter-intuitive: instead of access-

ing the depths of the subject through the image, as we generally expect to do with portraiture, we reach the soul of Scherman's painting through the "skin"—the most superficial layer of appearance—of its subject. Legend has it that only one daguerreotype of Balzac exists, because—according to the photographer Nadar, who once owned the image—the writer suspected photography of capturing more than his likeness. He didn't fear that photography would steal his soul, but rather, his outermost layer of spectral being. As Nadar related in his memoirs, Balzac believed that all physical bodies are made entirely of an infinite number of ghostlike skins, one on top of another, and that photography had the power to peel away the topmost of these layers. Exposure to the camera, he feared, actually diminished the self. In his "Blue Highway" series, ongoing since 1998, Scherman paints portraits of celebrities worn thin by the camera's attention. Greta Garbo, Kurt Cobain, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Miles Davis, Chet Baker, Grace Kelly—each suffered the pressures of fame and what Scherman characterizes as "metaphysical anxiety." Some were depressive, some addicted to drink or drugs; several committed suicide. These are the kind of characters Scherman has fixated on for years, people "on the way down." A veil of blue—prussian, teal, cerulean, periwinkle, sapphire—sheathes each face, as though embalming it; in some areas, Scherman has burned through the uppermost layers of pigmented wax to expose radiant foundations of gold and green. We recognize the faces of these cultural icons instantly, automatically, but the textural richness of the paintings' surfaces reveals itself at a slower pace. Comparisons to the celebrity portraiture of Elizabeth Peyton or to Amy Adler's photographed drawings of photographs break down here, on the material level, where Scherman's work, devoid of irony, is unabashedly painterly. The pigmented wax is at once succulent and tough, seeming to vacillate between liquid and solid states. It ripples and furrows, drips in long trails, gathers in gritty, crusty patches. Rubbed to the point of abrasion in places, it's glazed to a rich shine in others and occasionally scorched down to the canvas's raw, naked weave. Scherman's process is exceedingly physical.

Scherman started painting with wax in 1974, when, as a student at the Royal College of Art in London, he first saw Jasper Johns's encaustic paintings. Johns had been using the technique since the 1950s in his flag paintings and collages, and he used wax in the '70s and '80s as well, for his cast body fragments. Bodily associations with wax date back to its earliest representational uses in ancient Greek



Miles Davis, 2000, 59 1/2 inches square. Unus Foundation, Birmingham, Ala.

and Roman funerary rites, where it served as a pliable, skinlike covering for plaster life casts. Between those ancient practices and the creepy verisimilitude it affords the figures in today's wax museums, wax has gone in and out of favor as a painting medium. The 19th-century American artist Rembrandt Peale touted encaustic for portraiture, claiming that it was akin to painting "with liquid flesh." Its fluidity yields an almost animate image, suggesting movement, more living face than mask. Roman artists in ancient Egypt around the 1st century A.D. may have had the same effect in mind when painting what have become known as the Fayum portraits, highly individualized images in encaustic on wooden panels inserted over mummy wrappings or attached to mummy cases.



Jim Morrison, 2001, 30 by 40 1/2 inches. Private collection. All works this article encaustic on canvas.

In two recent series of encaustic portraits, one dealing with entertainment celebrities, the other with figures from the French Revolution and Nazi Germany, Tony Scherman examines the relationship between power and human destructiveness, whether directed inward toward the self or outward toward society as a whole.



Working the Impala, 2001, 59 7/8 inches square. Collection Leonard and Caroline Kady.



Tomorrow the World, 1998-99, 83% by 96 inches. Collection Jean Hamon. Paintings this spread and next from the "About 1789" series.

Since the 1990s, encaustic has surged in popularity. The way we experience the past through the present has a fitting material echo in the way time is embedded in the encaustic process, translucent outer layers of a painting allowing a view of what's beneath. Process remains visible, as though ongoing yet temporarily stilled. In Scherman's work, wax reinforces painting's capacity to both record a process and achieve a likeness.

Many of these works are quite large (8 or 9 feet on a side), so that the viewer's face-to-face confrontation with the subject expands to a broader,

body-to-body encounter with the painting itself. However direct this experience, though, it can't bridge our psychological distance from the subject: a celebrity is available to us only superficially, through the media. Scherman appropriates photographs of these pop-culture stars from the press, then follows up this secondhand approach to the subjects by painting them with intense physical abandon.

Each of Scherman's "Blue Highway" portraits reads, then, as a field of contradictions—both seductive and aloof, spontaneous and prescribed, perpetually elusive and yet instantly legible. The surface is raw with

*Right, Mirabeau's
First Funeral,
1995-97,
59 1/2 by 54 inches.
Crestet
Centre d'Art,
Paris.*



*Right, Napoleon
at Waterloo, 1998,
83 3/4 inches
square. Collection
Owen B. Shime,
Toronto.*



expressionist fervor, but the subject tame by virtue of its iconic familiarity. While Scherman's painting process entails risk and vulnerability, the imagery itself exudes fixity, control. This union between the celebrity's public exposure (skin) and Scherman's private enactment (soul) delivers a memorable frisson.

It is almost as though Scherman were practicing a kind of visual ventriloquism, throwing his voice into the body of another. The practice hints of deceit, and yet how much can we ever trust likeness to reveal being? A successful portrait can elucidate character (or at least class, station, profession), but sometimes mimesis can be used as a lure. Scherman likens its appeal to our primal craving for melody or story. He is exceedingly adept at delivering the satisfactions of representational likeness, but he exercises it like a dark charm, offering up a barbed and unsettling beauty.

Comparable ambivalence haunts Scherman's previous series, "Chasing Napoleon" (1995-98). Here, most of the faces portrayed are known to us not just by their looks, but also through their legacies, histories scarred by violence and abused power. Napoleon is the central subject, and his likeness, which Scherman adapts from familiar, even iconic images by David, Gros, Ingres, Canova, Delaroche and others, recurs with drumbeat regularity. The conqueror's face extends to the edges of each canvas, dominating it entirely and sometimes exceeding its

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boundaries. Scherman's gaze is like a zoom lens invasively closing in on smaller and smaller sections of his subject. Dress, pose and setting have all been stripped away, leaving the face alone as a free-floating signifier of human potential.

Daunting in scale and hung low on the wall, these paintings can engulf our field of vision. A single face can extend from our head to our shins. The frontal stares and locked gazes are unnervingly direct. Faces emerge from black like fossils surfacing in liquid tar. In contrast to the quenching tones of the "Blue Highway" paintings, the palette throughout this series is warm, humid, the colors of blood, earth and flesh. Here, and throughout Scherman's work, paintbrush hairs broken off in the heat of the encaustic process remain suspended in the wax like little floating sacrifices.

In the "Chasing Napoleon" exhibitions (and in an identically titled book), Scherman mixes his Napoleon portraits with images of other figures from the French Revolution, as well as objects, animals and interiors keyed to the period—Robespierre's unmade bed, Marie Antoinette's dog, flowers at Mirabeau's funeral, a drowning horse at



*Marie Antoinette's
Dog Odin, 1996-97,
40 1/2 inches square.
Private collection,
Berlin.*



*Marat, 1997,
40 1/2 inches square.
Private collection.*

Scherman's historical mug shots aspire to protect us from ourselves, keeping our moral ancestors alive to remind us of our murderous nature.



Young Robespierre, 1997-98, 30 inches square. California Center of the Arts, Escondido, Calif.

figures were fraught with controversy. Shifting political tides made determinations of complicity and heroism fluid. Perpetrators sought to identify themselves as victims in hopes of ensuring the future viability of their political careers, but issues of responsibility clung stubbornly to their images, as they still do in the versions painted by Scherman.

Portraiture's memorial function has traditionally been exercised to celebrate the powerful, to sustain their hallowed status in public memory. Scherman's images, painted on a heroic scale and with muscular intensity, have that same aggrandizing effect, even as they depict anti-heroes, culprits, demonic strategists. Portraits extend the lives of their subjects, enabling ancestors to live on in image if not in legacy. They also serve as relics, protective talismans to assist the living. Scherman's historical mug shots from the "Chasing Napoleon" series aspire to protect us from ourselves. They keep our collective moral ancestors alive as a reminder of our dark nature and the terrible historical events to which it has repeatedly given rise. Like the faces in old photographs, whose effect W.G. Sebald describes in his novel *Austerlitz*, these visages surface from the past as if to exercise memory of their own, to muse upon *our* roles.

Is Scherman painting homages to the formidable power of his subjects, or is he burning them in effigy, forcing heat through their constructed images? His work occupies an ambivalent position somewhere between



Chez les Robespierre II, 1996-98, 59 1/2 inches square. Private collection.

La Vendée, the face of Charlotte Corday, Marat in the form of an eagle. Lacking the connective tissue of historical narrative, the images read like film stills. Scherman regards the series as a deck of cards which can be shuffled and recombined. Mixed among them like wild cards are paintings that, while still part of the series, refer explicitly to Nazi Germany—paintings of Albert Speer and propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, for example, or of a horse grazing at Oradour, the site of a Nazi massacre.

Through this work, Scherman bridges what French novelist Jacques Henric calls the "monstrous utopia" of the French Revolution and the horrors of the Third Reich. The Jacobin-led government of 1793-94, while claiming to enfranchise its citizenry, established itself as a prototype of the modern totalitarian state. Robespierre, whom Scherman represents as a cherubic child, as well as by proxy in a portrait of his mother and an image of his empty bed, engineered the government's brutal attempts at imposing a single, common will upon a diverse and divided populace. Justifying horrific crimes as necessary to uphold the security of the Fatherland, the French revolutionary government, like that of Nazi Germany, conducted itself with near-religious fervor, tolerating no dissent.

Scherman's series reads as a historical meditation on mass murder. He has chased Napoleon right into the present day. His portraits of the agents of change bear the weight of the subjects' own promises to restore fundamental human rights, as well as that rhetoric's perverse enactment, affirming the evil of humanity, and the utter humanity of evil. In the years surrounding the French Revolution, portraits of active public

Oradour, 1997, 59 1/2 inches square. Private collection.





Albert Speer, 1996-97, 72 inches square. Private collection, Berlin. Photos this article courtesy the artist and Winston Wächter Mayer Fine Art, New York.

these two extremes, taking them both into account and capitalizing on the friction of their meeting. Scherman is intrigued by the way meaning loosens itself from a work of art in the course of time and through changes of context. He paraphrases Derrida, describing painting as “always already a resolved contradiction.” Its layers of being need not agree any more than our own. □

Work from the “Blue Highway” series appeared at Winston Wächter Mayer Fine Art, New York [Feb. 27-Apr. 6]; Chac Mool Gallery, Los Angeles [Apr. 18-June 1]; and Galerie

Simonne Stern, New Orleans [June 1-July 3]. “Chasing Napoleon” appeared at the Sarah Moody Gallery of Art, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa [Apr. 6-May 20, 2001]; the Fred Jones, Jr. Museum of Art, Norman, Okla. [June 15-Aug. 24, 2001]; the New England College Gallery, Henniker, N.H. [Sept. 20-Oct. 28, 2001]; the University of Toronto Art Centre [Nov. 29, 2001-Mar. 23, 2002] and the Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga, Tenn. [May 4-June 16]. It travels to the University of Louisiana, Lafayette [Sept. 7–Nov. 15], and the Ellen Noel Art Museum, Odessa, Tex. [Dec. 7, 2002-Jan. 19, 2003]. The book *Chasing Napoleon* was published in 1999 by Cameron & Hollis and is distributed by D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers.

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