

RALPH GOINGS: America's Vermeer
(Catalog Essay By Edward Lucie-Smith)

It does a painter both good and harm to be indissolubly connected with a particular art movement. This is particularly true of the movement that succeeded Pop Art—the Super Realism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Pop was an artistic philosophy, almost a complete way of life, bonded to a consumer culture that was in no hurry to disappear. Varieties of Pop Art are still being made today, more than forty years after the movement first launched itself. Super Realism seemed to occupy a much more restricted piece of territory. The general consensus was that it bloomed and faded within a very brief period.

The truth is, of course, that a good painter tends to remain a good painter, whatever style the critics choose to link him with. Ralph Goings, one of the leading practitioners of Super Realism, is still going strong. Indeed, if you look on the Internet, he seems to be going stronger than ever, such as the demand for posters and prints of his work. The theoreticians have chosen to forget about him, but a huge American public still keeps him in its heart.

When you look more closely, you soon find excellent reasons for this continuing enthusiasm. In the first place Goings, a native Californian, reflects aspects of America that are familiar to most Americans but not usually celebrated in art. His pickup trucks and diners reflect the mobile, freewheeling quality of the American life-style. In the United States, if you don't like the place you are in, then there's always a highway that beckons you to go somewhere else. In this sense Goings' paintings are full of American optimism, but also of melancholy—will the perfect place to stop and settle ever in fact be found?

At a time when painterly technique is less and less understood, Goings' work has suffered from a contempt it doesn't deserve. His paintings may look photographic, but they are not in fact photographs. They are painstakingly made with the brush—in exactly the way that Vermeer made his light-filled interiors and his famous View of Delft. This comparison is not made at random. One thing that Goings' work does have in common with photographs is its examination of light. Photography records, not objects as things in themselves, but the fall of light on objects—in other words, the way in which light is shaped by anything that interrupts its trajectory from the source.

This characteristic is not perhaps so obvious in the earlier paintings, where the setting is outdoors. It is very noticeable in the interiors and still lifes that come later. These make it obvious that the artist is fascinated by the way in which light magically sanctifies what would otherwise be banal visual events.

Indeed, embracing banality is very much the point of what Goings does. He wants to tell us that the most ordinary things are well worth looking at—provided that we have the discipline to look at that property, on their own terms and for their own sake. After all, this is precisely what Vermeer does in the View of Delft. Why should Goings be ashamed to follow his example?

—Edward Lucie-Smith 2004
© 2004 The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio All rights reserved