

If We Are Lucky

By Fred Dewey If we are lucky, and have had time in the country or a good backyard, we have a personal connection to trees. I lived in the mountains of North Carolina by a row of white pines planted by my grandmother. I climbed one of them and eventually built a tree house in it. I can still hear and feel the wind and the top swaying above me, the smell of needle and bark, a firm platform above the ground. A few years ago, one of the tree's companions fell on our house, and so they were all cut down. Mountain people dislike the pine because it topples easily; now all that is left are stumps, and an occasional pileated woodpecker. An old Cherokee tale tells the story of the origin of the pine: Some young boys were playing, and weren't respectful to their mothers. As a result they had to eat stone soup as a punishment. But the boys refused, and floated slowly upwards into the heavens. One mother grabbed her son back, only to have him swallowed by the earth. Over time, her tears produced a sprout—and this was the first pine.

The Cherokee tale stitches the tree, as a tree, into the lives of humankind. Most traditions view trees as biological, as part of the landscape, or, in the case of some stories and tales, as a human-like spirit. We view a tree through its human uses and natural functions, seldom regarding it in terms of being planted, nurtured, grafted, tended, or harvested and cut. It is symptomatic that companies now speak of altering tree DNA, to cut out the lignum that makes them stand upright, to make pulping cheaper. Should this accidentally spread, we would end up with a world, in fact, without trees, or at least without upright trees. A civilization that could even imagine such a thing is dangerous indeed, exacting a violence upon things more savage and morally unreliable than nature itself.

In response to both science and our arrogance, Jean-Paul Sartre began something new when he staged his first great phenomenological revelation before a tree, in his debut novel *Nausea*, set in a small French city. His depiction demonstrated the peculiar and malleable relation to the world that humans and consciousness constitute; existence is something beyond system and order. It is the city that teaches us that the organization of things is irrevocably human, making naturalistic illusions difficult to maintain. That they are maintained even in the city, however, tells us a little. In Los Angeles, on the streets, one feels trees and

greenery everywhere; from an airplane above the vast metropolis, one realizes one has made a mistake. Human buildings and roads stretch to every horizon and the tree is hardly present, non-existent as a forest, a mass, as anything other than a spec.

It is here that Lucas Reiner's Los Angeles Trees, begun in Fall 2001, opens up powerful new ground from which to see things with new eyes. Reiner's paintings show primarily city trees that have been carved and cut at the curbside, not through any desire to artfully landscape, but because they impede the flow of traffic, obscure a commercial business sign, or block a sightline. The agents here are not esthetic, but practical, indifferent, massive, and usually bureaucratic. The stories his trees hint at are not legends or origin tales, but narratives of unseen brutality and return.

As early as 1870, Frederick Law Olmstead described the shock on seeing the savage cutting of street trees; one could say it has taken a century and a quarter for an artist, and one from Los Angeles, to notice this and consider it revealing. Casting off the landscape tradition, Reiner collects and isolates images of his altered and shaped trees. A leaning city tree, Reiner speculates, must have been hit by a car or truck; it is abandoned to grow on forever, at an angle. Another tree, a complex and bare stump, probably cut for blocking a flower-shop sign, sprouts tenacious clumps. City trees persist, returning after their life has been hacked away, ultimately generating a form we confuse with the natural, and then ignore. The paintings, by their structure, approach, and tenacity, prevent us from ignoring this; they alter how we perceive things. After my very first studio visit with the artist, I spotted tree after tree with under-branches cut in flat planes, something I'd never noticed, not even on an avenue I'd driven down a hundred times. After looking at Reiner's paintings, one begins to see such trees everywhere. One begins to actually see the trees.

We recognize the notion of humanly altered form in nature on a grand scale; it is much harder to grasp this on an ordinary, or daily scale. We seldom pay attention to forms that, with a life of their own, respond to and highlight our harm to them. We know this a bit from the rise of bacteriological resistance, from the way oceans and lakes can be killed or come back, from the loss of species and the weird order that ensues. The artist once cited the atom bomb as a key fact, and this is correct: once the bomb arrived, science and technology revealed a massive capacity to alter and destroy. On the level of daily experience, however, this is not always clear. Artists have examined our alteration of things and the

consequences, yet this often remains within a scientific or overly dramatic framework, hiding the ordinariness and ubiquity of the matter. Reiner's approach to the tree, and to conveying the violence done to it, is entirely different. Carried forward by a meditative discipline reminiscent of the old monk poet, Basho, who, it was said, would go into the mountains to pay tribute to specific trees, Reiner carries this powerfully into the present. He comes upon his trees by car, and, stealing a photograph, returns to his studio to lay them out, sketch, and begin to paint their portraits.

While an assembly of these paintings may look somehow like an arborist or horticulturalist's index, the trees are never identified by type or species; their names come from the street where the tree is located and seen. These are no longer merely biological; they are part of a condition, part of our human artifice. It is not simply that the forms are strange, colors and backgrounds surprising, all the more real for being removed from any context beyond a street name. A complex, "empty" field foregrounds the tree's shape, even as the absence of a horizon-line removes conventional modes of orientation; the tree floats, set apart by itself or with a couple others, disorienting perception. The result is an image, yet not one that links to conventional images or image-making. In contrast to the mass-produced images that so ubiquitously dismantle and mold our perception, we sense images before us that are hand-made and refer to what exists. The power of images to generate unreality, so total now, is arrested, slowed, transformed, undone. The images and shapes may be slightly surreal, yet they remain all the more real for it, precisely because they are real. Their power refers not to an ideal realm of advertising signs and fast-moving dramatic scenes and situations, but to slow, concrete, implacable existence. The result is quiet, calling for contemplation, and, in a final move, hints at the story and mystery behind the shape. We are asked, quite simply, to look at a real tree.

Something so simple ends up quite radical. Reiner absorbed many of the lessons of conceptualism and minimalism, beginning his own work with the draining away of content and figuration first practiced by the abstract post-war painters and minimalists like Robert Ryman, known for his extended series of all-white paintings. Ryman, Reiner says, reached the end of something, posing a core problem for painting: once everything is removed, what do you put back? One can no longer be naïve about making an image; one must also preserve the fact that, for the painter, "the hand leads." The painting is materially grounded through a tactile register of materials: oil, earth, hair, cotton, and so on, the age-old materials of painting, but there is, still, a problem. The world is saturated

with images, and one lives in a world full of things, people, and so much more. Even an all-white painted surface is an image and an object in the world.

In a 2004 essay on the painter Philip Guston, who had grown up in Los Angeles and, after years in New York, turned away from abstraction towards radical, almost comic-book figuration in the mid-1960s, Reiner observes that “non-representational art is no longer a way out. If the image is to come, it must come after the struggles of experience in the world.” Beginning with minimalist canvases, Reiner moved into painting signs and word fragments in the urban landscape, influenced by the work of LA artists Ruscha, Diebenkorn, Celmins, and others. Out of this emerged a complex approach to the relation of sign and image, one in which the sign exists solely in the world and not outside it or by reference to other signs. A sign is semiotic in origin, but in the real world where such signs arise, things are not so simple. Reiner’s early letter fragments that “signify,” found pasted on a wall, painted in an abstract field, prepared the artist for things not immediately semiotic that nonetheless operate as signs in an urban realm. A struggling tree outside his studio suddenly became different from the trees he’d seen in forests, “in nature.” It was made somehow, and distinct; clearly planted by human hands, it appeared slightly odd. Reiner began painting these trees, seeing them in his travels around the city, sure they were signs of something. This led to the discovery that they’d been trimmed, by a Department of Transportation employee, a shop or store owner, by some anonymous individual or body. Each shape had its own story which might never be known. Out of this, a kind of poesis emerged, one that neither artistically manicured trees nor natural trees have. Poetry finds meaning in things, and if there is a story, it comes from the arrangement of words rather than the tale they construct. The abstract depiction of the trees in Reiner’s paintings captures this concrete existence as signs, allegories of human character and intervention. The words of Juan Gris describe this: “If I am not in possession of the abstract, with what am I to control the concrete? ... If I am not in possession of the concrete, with what am I to control the abstract?”

Reiner feels great affinity with the poets. “Poems are made of words we know, paintings of things we know—things very common and factual—in an unusual and unfamiliar way.” The root etymology of “poesis” and “poetics” is the making of things and, in contrast to the Romantic and bucolic traditions, what is natural for Reiner is very much made and human, altered. Here we begin to see precisely how Los

Angeles Trees directs us toward something fundamental. For in these visual poems and allegories, these portraits, a relation to images is presented that tells us about existence, tightening the relationship between being and seeing. Our condition, and the condition of the trees, is human. The problems arise when this making, this creation, alters what is given to us, and we no longer pay attention to who we are or what we have done.

In the aforementioned Guston essay, Reiner explores Guston's anxiety and guilt at the height of Vietnam and white racist reaction, leading to "self-doubt regarding not only painting, but how we see ourselves." Guston asked a question that would be extraordinary from an artist at any time: "What if I'm evil?" At a time similar to our own, one of moral collapse and foreign violence, when war and political depravity roiled the human landscape, Guston felt shame at assuming God's powers of creation, yet ended up saying, as he did to Ross Feld: "I WANT TO MAKE."

The result of this extraordinary internal dialogue is that the image becomes the terrain of what is, in no uncertain terms, a moral struggle. An image is not just an image, as Godard once famously put it, asking "Is it a just image?" The image one creates is made, a poetic image, and so it must assume a responsibility for that creation because it echoes all creation. The reality we live in can be extraordinary and miraculous, but it can also be difficult and problematic, both for very concrete reasons. Imagery that disconnects us from this, from our world, contributes to a mentality of "making" that links, at a not very great remove, to human violence, denial, and ignorance, on a devastating scale. At the same time, an image painted that connects us back to the world, however small, however ordinary, becomes a moral gesture, signaling a kind of existential effort to, as the phrase goes, do justice to how things are. The painters who deal with the world as significant, as sign enough, end up enabling us to achieve a kind of alternative relation to the image, a justice that is poetic and real. The links of Reiner's works to those of painter Giorgio Morandi are clear. Morandi did painting after painting of bottles and landscapes, in the tones and colors of his native Bologna, pushing a commitment to investigation and representation of the world to the limit. Morandi was trying, even desperately, to send us back to the world.

Activation of perception carries us beyond language and is irreducible to iconography; a morality of the image is not based on its content, on moral themes, but its activity, a commitment to the world. Against the unreality of the image, one can rediscover a poetry of the

object, of what is, and learn the experience of this poetry through the tactile presence of the painter's hand. Experience becomes primary, a primacy that is lost if objects and things are mass-produced or conceived as mere subject matter. In the end, it is not even the sign character, but the preserve of accumulated human meaning, not the subject matter—the realm of commentary—but truth, that serves as a kind of living, activating critique. At the end of the day, it is not the tree as a sign that matters, but the sign as a route to an array of truths, as evidence of actualities, of things worth knowing that are as vital to our lives as a tree.

It is in the most specific and concrete thing that we come back to questions of our greater responsibility to the world, to understanding what it is, who we are, and what matters. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in a 1971 collection, wrote a prose poem about an elm log. A year after a tree had been chopped down, dragged around by tractor, sawn into logs, tossed on barges and wagons, rolled into stacks, and piled up, one log had re-sprouted. Approaching it “as though on the executioner's block,” he writes, “we could not bring ourselves to bite into it with our saw. How could we? That log cherished life as dearly as we did; indeed, its urge to live was even stronger than ours.”

Such humility toward life, the awareness of what we do to it and with what power, the concern with how we conduct ourselves and what endures: painting can convey these simply by teaching us to see, teaching us to find where evidence arises, in looking at city trees over and over and over. Reiner concludes that painting can “deflate idols and offer in their place a felt response to a specific experience.” It is this gritty minimalism, educated in skepticism by a city of images, that led this Los Angeles painter to quote Paul Celan, a poet from present-day Chernivtsi, the town of Reiner's family only a couple generations ago:

Yet,
yet it shoots up, that tree. It,
it too
stands against
the plague.