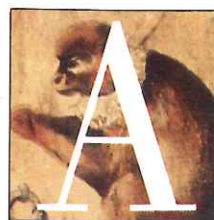


# ATTILA

## RICHARD LUKACS

Classical, compelling, brilliant and amoral, the works of this young Canadian expatriate radically challenge accepted ideas of painting



Attila Richard Lukacs' paintings are ambitious, strange, compelling things. Their moral innocence — or depravity, depending on

one's point of view — is passionate, overheated and sweet. His work seems out of sync with the times. The paintings not only look old and worn, their mucky and organic surfaces bring forth metaphorical associations of corporeal decay and architectural ruin. With one recent canvas measuring 16 by 18 feet, the scale recalls more heroic times for painting than the present.

For the past two years this 26-year-old Canadian artist has been working in Berlin. For most of that time he's had a studio in the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, an old hospital that has been renovated for use as artists' studios. Lukacs works fairly much in isolation and is not part of a scene. Berlin's "wild painting" of only five or six years ago, which attracted so much attention, is, for now anyway, petrified in a premature gentrification of its effects.

In the spring of 1987, Lukacs showed his new work in Bethanien's gallery, a space that was once the hospital chapel. The recent work falls into several series: a group of paintings of monkeys are introspective and private, while other series that portray skinheads, the damaged youth of the '80s, are more rhetorical and intended for the discourse of public space. The monkey paintings are sparsely painted, built of stains, smears and passages of incomplete drawing on an open field of raw canvas. They look like faded

PHOTO BY ROSAMOND NORBURY

BY SCOTT WATSON



ALLEGORY OF WATER  
(1987), TAR, OIL AND  
VARNISH ON CANVAS,  
87" x 53 1/2"





WHERE THE FINEST YOUNG  
MEN... (1987), TAR, OIL  
AND VARNISH ON CANVAS  
168" x 190 1/2"

“My parents are Hungarian. They came out from Hungary in 1956, immigrants of the revolution, and when I was born, they were quite new to the country. They gave me a Hungarian name, Attila, but it was harder for them to find an English name for me. They came up with Richard, which was the name of one of my father’s professors. In Hungary, Attila is quite a common name, but it was a terrible name to have when I was growing up here and going to school, so I dropped the name for 20 years. In Berlin, where I live now, I use Attila more than Richard because, well, it’s more European and people are more comfortable with it, for some reason, than with Richard.”

frescoes and although one work is called *I Like Painting, I Like the Future*, the references are to the past. A small painting of monkeys by Bruegel in the collection of Berlin’s Dahlem Museum served as one point of inspiration. But the monkey is a traditional self-portrait for the painter, symbolic of the roots of drawing in mimesis. In *I Like Painting*... a monkey holds a razor and looks uncertainly into a mirror. He is preparing to shave his head in imitation of a skinhead. An outline figure beckons him on, promising the ideal. But the monkey pauses before the mirror in a moment of pragmatic self-assessment that postpones transformation indefinitely. There were only four of these monkey paintings in the Bethanien show, but Lukacs often refers to them as his best work and whenever he senses a shift in his painting, he returns to the image of the monkey.

The other works, which are both more interesting and more difficult, are public statements, borrowings from art history, including religious icons, official portraiture and grand-scale history painting. These offer their own particular view of paradise. An aroma of religiosity seeps out from every pore of Lukacs’ paintings, particularly in a series of small, blasphemous icons. The application of gold leaf to a surface that looks like it has been dipped in acid gives the pictures a look of staged

decrepitude, the faces sometimes sinking into the paint to the point of obscurity. Emblems of sadomasochistic games, terrorism or motorcycle machismo are substitutes for halos and stigmata.

Full-length portraits of gold-kilted youths, “golden outlaws,” as one Berlin reviewer called them, offer a similarly mixed message, the gold signifying an angelic order while the red Doc Marten’s boots, Fred Perry polo shirts and shorn heads refer to the dress code or uniform of the skinheads, who in real life are no angels.

The skinheads Lukacs uses as models and who are the objects of his adoration are a new social type of the 1980s. These disfranchised youths are at the bottom of the social heap, the fall-out from the neo-conservative reordering of the social structure. Kids imitate the look everywhere, but the nihilist, embittered and racist skinheads of Britain and Germany are serious and vicious. Posing as the rag-tag army of the new far Right, they flaunt signs of “fascinating fascism,” sending shudders through the bourgeois order whose waste produce they’ve become. Lukacs’ use of them as subjects poses some interesting problems. It is fairly clear that Lukacs has little interest in the social problems of which the skinheads are a symptom. Nor do his paintings give voice to the skinheads, but rather

“After I left the Emily Carr school, I had planned to move to New York. I had a Canada Council B Grant and I realized that the way I live, the cost of my materials plus a studio, a B Grant would only last me three or four months in New York. I decided it would be best to get out of North America and go to Europe. That was almost two years ago. I didn’t really have any idea about Europe. I decided to come to Berlin because there were some people from Vancouver here — Michael Morris, for example. I thought Berlin would be a good place to get a feel for Europe. I stayed here and I was quite lucky: I found a good studio and I’ve been working here and showing here. I’ve also found a dealer in Cologne. My German is getting better, too. I didn’t know a single word when I came here.”



“The skinhead theme is something I’m working on a lot more deeply in my newer work. It’s a social milieu I have access to — I had access to it in Canada as well, it exists everywhere. The skinheads are at the bottom of the social heap. They are visibly rebelling, visibly anti-social, with their shaved heads and their tattoos and their, uh, uniform. That’s *bodily* rebellion. And, of course, it’s a form of *social* rebellion too, politically steeped. I definitely do *not* consider myself an official member of that society. I’m more like a voyeur.”

borrow their image for another purpose. He extracts from that image an ideal of masculine beauty that is all the more rarefied for being found among the completely marginalized. The skinheads become, in his paintings, the godlike objects of his desire.

Lukacs’ concerns intersect here with general trends in image culture and it is worthwhile to point out how he diverges from that culture. The veneration of unalloyed masculinity, with its implications of sadomasochism, is becoming increasingly standard fare in the products of cultural industry. Sylvester Stallone’s muscle op-

Raphaelite never-never land. The companies of nude medieval knights in Burne-Jones are, however, usually asleep or nodding out from too deep an intake of the *fin-de-siècle*’s opiate vapors. The youths in Lukacs’ paintings are relentlessly awake. Both painters, however, are latter day Sadeans, longing for a lost aristocratic relationship to nature. The charmed knights and the dandified skinheads are vestiges of the Arcadian philosophic academy. Both painters use the apparition of an ideal male beauty, before which they urge the viewer to a kind of self-abandon and prostration, to intimate remoteness and loss.

“The whole skinhead situation is more political in Europe. They really know what they’re fighting for, what they believe in. In England or Germany or Spain, they represent a very nationalist feeling — you know, close the borders and close off the culture to their people alone. It is, of course, based on an extreme right-wing or neo-Nazi feeling.”

eras, in which his iron-pumped limbs are routinely beaten, tortured, bloodied and slathered with mud, attest to a river of unexamined nervousness about masculinity and desire running through the substratum of our post-industrial world. These films, and the dozens like them, are aimed at the hearts and minds of the 13-year-old male psyche for whom images of the muscle-bound male body triumphing over physical humiliation signals the symbolic mastery of confusing new sexual feelings. What is most disturbing about these films is the shape they would give to those feelings. The implied dynamic is one in which repressed homosexual longings become the only approved form of heterosexuality. Lukacs’ paintings might dip into the same anxious waters as the Stallone films but they come away with different images. Rather than repressing sexual feeling, Lukacs celebrates it.

Lukacs’ imagination, which is almost Victorian in its excited identification of desire with the sinister, has more in common with Burne-Jones than Stallone. Lukacs’ boys’ world takes us to a pre-

And in both worlds, desire is directed toward the unattainable, making these worlds also about denial.

The largest and best of Lukacs’ works is a painting called *Where the Finest Young Men...* Groups of nude or partially clothed skinheads lounge in a classical but decayed interior. The grouping on the right is a quote from Caravaggio’s *Musicians*. The *mise-en-scène* seems satanic. An ass-headed figure (who is not Shakespeare’s Bottom) presides over the only action in

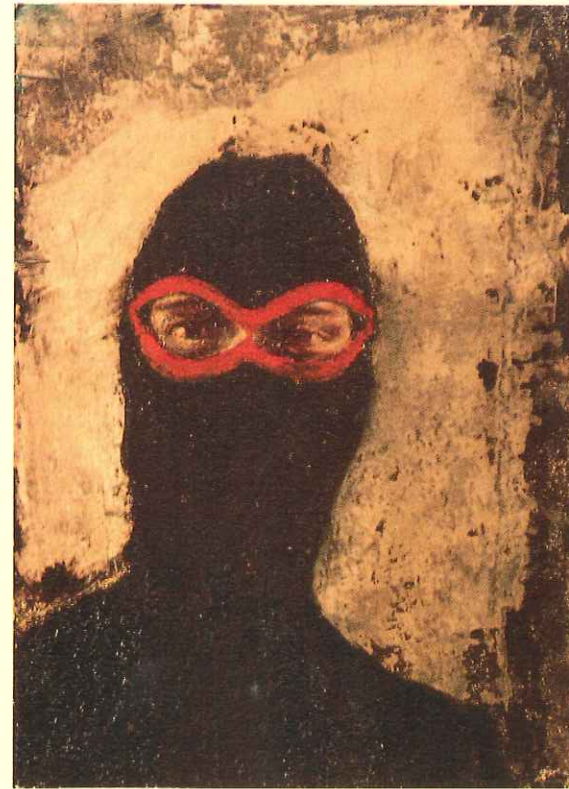
“In Berlin there are two factions within the skinheads: the neo-Nazi, extreme right-wing faction, which is basically the same faction as the skinheads that exist in England where it all started, and the Redskins, who much outnumber the neo-Nazis. The Redskins are basically communist, and believe in the proletariat, the worker. They are very anti-bourgeoisie. The two factions hate each other. I’m not really aligned with either one. I wouldn’t consider myself a neo-Nazi or a communist. The skinheads who populate my paintings make good characters. They are there but are distanced, in a way, from the viewer, in that they’re on the border between action and inertness. They’re not really *doing* anything. They’re sort of generalized. They are my 20th-century warriors. I purposely haven’t engaged them in any violent or typical acts that people might expect of them, so I don’t have to get into making too much of a social statement about them.”

the painting, a “baptism” in a tub of black liquid. The scene is flooded with baroque light coming in from a high source at a dramatic angle, but the light barely penetrates pools of tarry black darkness that are coeval with the liquid in the mysterious baptismal tub. Next to the tub, at the base of the scaffolding, the black paint comes alive in the work’s most surrealist passage. A monocular creature, half man, half ribbed rubber dildo, gazes at a stiff member emerging from a glory hole, the painterly drip, a sign of virile will-to-expression in painting since the ’40s, representing dribbling semen.

Above this dark and obscure realm the gazes of the men, turned outward to meet the eyes of the spectator, dare the viewer to enter the painting and experience its painterly presence, a presence that is not unified but constructed of contradictory layers, each bearing its own associations and codes of reference. For despite the architectural and figurative character of *Where the Finest Young Men...*, it is conceived as a fractured rather than a unified space. In fact, the painting literally grew, section added to section, as it was being painted.

Rich passages of oil painting are familiar signs of material wealth and expressive depth. The heavily worked surfaces can themselves absorb considerable psychological empathy. If we are seduced by the palpability of the paint, however, it is because this surface already represents a historical form. It is the heaving, aching, wounded surface of postwar painting — that “heroic” arena of pitiful outburst and faith in an exalted human subject.

The crouching, white, fill-in-the-blank figure in the lower right is a space reserved for the viewer as supplicant or victim. The



PORTRAIT #12 (1988),  
TAR, OIL, ENAMEL AND  
VARNISH ON CANVAS,  
22½" x 30½"



PORTRAIT #5 (1987),  
TAR, OIL, ENAMEL AND  
VARNISH ON CANVAS,  
17½" x 28"



PORTRAIT #14 (1987),  
TAR, OIL, ENAMEL AND  
GOLDFLEAF ON CANVAS,  
19" x 26¾"



PORTRAIT #15 (1988),  
TAR, OIL, ENAMEL AND  
VARNISH ON CANVAS,  
22" x 31"



“I hate the term homo-erotic. It’s a 19th-century or Victorian English term. As soon as you see a male nude in a painting, it’s termed homo-erotic, but when you see a female nude in a painting, it’s never referred to as hetero-erotic. In my earlier works, like one of the big paintings shown at Mercer Union in Toronto, there was a definite so-called homo-erotic content. In the newer work I don’t deal with that; what I’m trying to do now is deal with the male nude in the way classical nudes have always been dealt with — they don’t have to have those sexual implications.”

white silhouette tells us, however, that the figures do not really inhabit the depth of the painting but are sealed off from it by a prophylactic shield of white enamel. This serves as the ground for each figure and is still quite readable underneath the glazes that give the figures form in space. The figures are not born from the psychological depths of the painting symbolized by the tarry blacks but are refugees from photographs. Thus the cut-out look and sometimes awkward foreshortening. Thus the uneven handling of the light source as it moves over the figures in a jerky series of camera-flash illuminations. Photography has left many mechanical traces in this painting. Some of the figures are obviously derived from the same model. The painting, then, avoids psychological identification with the figures, who are painted differently than their surrounding space. They are not portraits but rather posi-

tions, representations of repetition, mere abstractions of figures. Patterns are created by dangling legs and open, folded and akimbo arms, relaxed and limpid, belying all the signs of menace in a composition that is classically calm but still suggestive of great fury.

The painting’s unity is also interrupted by the veil-like layer of tattoos that is applied over a coat of varnish and is the last thing Lukacs paints. These delicately painted inscriptions hover over the surface. Emblems of marginality and criminality gently waft into the viewer’s space. The tattoos are also abstract, almost divorced from the skin they supposedly brand. They are literal codes: words, signs, emblems; crucifix, snake, swastika. On the left breast of the figure standing nearest the open window, which is the dominant source of light, is the word “SKIN.” Great prominence is given to

this pictorial moment where figuration turns into sign. The whole painting, however materially present, however much an incitement to desire it is meant to be, is veering toward a condition that resembles language. The passages through which desire circulates in *Where the Finest Young Men...* are complex structures of pictorial engineering designed to condense the object of desire into a readable code that organizes the body around impersonal signs. The strategies of the sadomasochist and the painter meet on this point.

The painting is a huge construction with many visible sutures. It hangs together despite discontinuities between the parts. What is somewhat astonishing is that this painting was directly painted from the ground up. There is no underdrawing and there were no preliminary drawings or sketches. In the 19th century, a history painting was the end result of many drawings and oil sketches that worked out the composition and the disposal of the light before the finished painting was approached. The painting was in effect created before it was painted. Lukacs paints as a Modernist, despite his references to the past. He leaves out all the rationalizing procedures of his academic precursors. The technique of confronting the emptiness of the canvas was

given great prestige by American Abstract Expressionists, for whom it became the only authentic method. It is strange to see it used to return to spaces of classical figuration.

Yet Lukacs’ paintings do contain that all-important sense of the facts of painting, despite the figurative content. It’s because of, not despite, his somewhat rough technique, which is quite readable in front of the works, that this sense of the paint is allowed to dominate the images, which become just more material.

The paintings are almost like performance art. There is literally nothing “behind” them but the canvas, which records only what has gone on in front of it. The construction is reversed; the drawing comes last instead of first. As a result it fills in an empty space, the blank canvas, with which it is in continual tension. The sometimes oozing, viscous enamels and

“I don’t have any ambitions really. I have no real intention of out-Fischling Eric Fischl, for example. I don’t care about knocking the big guys off their pedestals. I’m not in a real position to do that. I want to produce nice work and have powerful exhibitions. I don’t think it all fits into any game plan. I have a real distaste for art politics, though. That’s one reason I’ve isolated myself so much.”

tars are melting, as if being rejected by the blankness they cover. One is reminded of the works of Anselm Kiefer. Painting today, at least that painting which confronts the limits of painting, seems most urgent when it traverses a void and sets in motion a dialectic between the image and its negation.

Brilliant and amoral, Lukacs’ paintings do cause consternation. As crystallizations of desire they take the moribund art of painting to a new, if posthumous, position on the limb. Representation becomes full-blown fantasy and transformation of the subject. When it comes to questions

concerning the actual skinheads, the paintings skip a beat, suggesting only that an inversion of values is required for the appearance of beauty. The extra-aesthetic discourse around sexuality is bound to affect the response to his work, as art increasingly comes under scrutiny and is asked to account for its antisocial aspects. The latest works already withhold that which in earlier work was given full expression, although the images are still alluringly cruel.

Lukacs is a very talented painter and a very young one. Obviously he wants to shake up the world of painting. So far he has painted some challenging canvases that show a courageous readiness to forge an individual path in an art world that concentrates on trends. His affirmation of painting poses some difficult questions for a society that increasingly wants to regulate the culture of images.

*The Diane Farris Gallery is showing recent work by Attila Richard Lukacs from October 22 to November 9*

“In Berlin, I don’t really see much of what is going on. I isolate myself very much — I work hard. I don’t go to many openings; I see maybe 10 percent of what’s happening here. I prefer to spend my time in my studio. My day goes from about 12 noon to about three or four in the morning. I work, I go out and do my shopping, I work some more, then I go out and have dinner, I work some more and then maybe watch a movie on TV and then go back to work and finally maybe go out to have a drink at the end of the night. This goes on every day.”

ORDER, PRECISION, RESPECT (1987), TAR, OIL, VARNISH AND PENCIL ON CANVAS, 110 1/2" x 59 1/4"



AS (1988), TAR, OIL, VARNISH AND GOLDFLEAF ON CANVAS, 69" x 95 1/4"

