

# Petzel

Douglas Blau, "The Noun Effaced; Finish and the Unfinished Phrase," *Troy Brauntuch*, exh. cat. (New York: Mary Boone Michael Werner, 1985), pp. 4-5.

## THE NOUN EFFACED; FINISH AND THE UNFINISHED PHRASE

Douglas Blau

*The expressions "in a fog" and "in a mist" are often used to describe situations more metaphoric than real; but whether their reference be literal or no, the words suggest a difficulty distinguishing fact from fancy, a difficulty keeping an even keel. A fog-bound man is lost at sea, drifting with vision blurred, lacking position and bearings. In short, the eyes are open but are deprived of sight, leaving the onlooker to grope amidst unstable surroundings.*

*The thought might be applied to a Rothko, where we find no mooring, no solid ground; but as the subject is Troy Brauntuch's art, let us turn from the mist itself to the mist-ification of nouns. The motif might be recognized in images as different as Leonardo's portrait of The Baptist (where an apparition seems to slip between soft light and deep shade, confusing the material and immaterial, simplifying language—words such as "sublime," "ineffable" or "not to be fathomed" are uttered before that lapse into silence); certain works by Caravaggio (those in which the line separating the ephemeral from the tangible has been entangled or obscured); the candlelit scenes of Georges de La Tour; Turner's luminous swirlings. ... But, as these painters are Brauntuch's distant relatives, it might be more appropriate to advance to the Age of Mallarmé, to the Symbolist fathers: the mythological and operatic pictures of Fantin-Latour; to those mahogany-stained portraits by Eugène Carrière; to Whistler's muted Nocturnes and Venetian pastels, where ideas are hinted at rather than revealed; to the filmy, underexposed visions of Edward Steichen.... For, even if such works share little in the way of subject (whether sacred or profane) or style (whether hard or soft focus), the play between allusion and description, between the dissolving and resolved, is common to all. As in Brauntuch's images, weightlessness has been achieved through a blending of antithetical conceits (stasis + flux)—imbalance, here, is the product of balance.*

*While it is tempting to follow Whistler's advice and to float within such contemplative, atmospheric works as if they were calming tubs, it is also tempting to take note of the specific sort of disorienting frustration that effaced nouns induce. For, on one hand, they appeal to the wish to transcend, to go beyond or beneath the surface, to slip off into the im-*

*material, to digress; while, on the other, they provoke a yearning to consummate, to hold, to pigeonhole, to know the thing itself. Transcendence implies a defiance of closure, the freedom of knowing no bounds; consummation, a need to limit, to establish firmly, to ground.*

*Brauntuch's art has been structured in such a way as to play off this conundrum; for it encourages us to try to satisfy both desires. But, rather than fulfill either, the work frustrates both, keeping us between, holding us on hold; forever anticipating, we are left dangling in the air. Here in limbo, held in check, we find ourselves forced to view from a remote (non-) position—a position from which we can do nothing but observe ourselves attempting to seize, nothing but examine our own Tantalus-tic graspings. The game could be likened to a striptease; for, here, a flirtatious come-on continually challenges us to watch as the mind pursues a lure: an idealized image that evades; allure that gives a little but not too much, that promises and then delays.*

*The attraction, in Brauntuch's pencil drawings, took the form of subtle, finely-tuned markings made by an assured, meticulous hand. The drafting technique evoked that traditional Dutch touch, that finish which is often associated with qualities presumed to connote Quality—refinement, exclusivity, erudition, lucidity—and Veracity. Classically cool like a Hitchcock blonde, enticing ice, luxurious yet withdrawn, the style, itself, served as a decoy whose trappings, at first, were read not as an iceberg's tip but as a disinterested document.*

*Images fashioned in such a hand, like miniatures and other sorts of delicate handiwork, draw in the eye, coax it into coming closer so that the details hidden within the intricacies might be better studied. When faced with such precision, we commonly assume that patient examination will illumine every line; we expect to see all there is to see. But, here, the viewer's attempt to decipher, to penetrate the mystery was foiled by the presence of a highly-reflective, smoked-glass sheath. Like scratches on a record, static on the wire, like glitches on a screen, the scrim further distanced that object of desire, and, in doing so, invited a suspension of belief—for, rather than accept the authority of this idealizing style without*

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*hesitation, we were urged to think twice, to reconsider whether a photographic presentation actually places verifiable information within our reach.*

*Here, the interest in casting suspicion upon what is supposed steadfast (or unmasking concepts that wish to be considered authoritative rather than authored) was counterbalanced by the manner in which the artworks made the mysterious substantial. For, even though the drawings seemed to be hallucinations, pieces of them could be unscrambled; and, eventually, after repeated ponderings, the images could be seen in their entirety.*

*But, this notion of completeness misleads: the pictures were comprised of crystalline fragments—like oracular sayings or poems whose meter requires partially finished phrases, broken lines. Because of the ever-present, always-encroaching blackness and the Twilight Zone, film noir-esque lighting, these images all seemed to depict subjects or scenes seen in the dead of night, outside of time and, as in any blinding fog, without a definite sense of place. What exactly was taking place could not be read, for the clues either were lost in the shadows or lay beyond the image's edge. Continuing the metaphor of fragmentation, Brauntuch frequently divided the drawings or stretched them over many panels, creating diptychs and triptychs for no apparent reason save to further complicate the conceptual scheme.*

*Many of these strategies continue to be used in the new paintings: but, while much is the same, a great deal of change has occurred—the most obvious being the absence of glass, the enlarged scale, the addition of color, and, most important, a shift in the nature of the markings themselves: the photographic analogy remains intact, but now we see through a lens that has been vaselined; translucent strokes and plasmatic stains bleeding into or floating above their linen ground. If the drawings had the quality of rumors, these paintings leave an impression that they might be mirages: luminous, vacillating miasmas, mucid rather than lucid yet light as clouds. Without the glass, Brauntuch's visions maintain the look of vapor: shrouded images still hover beneath a thin veneer of fog.*

*Charged, as if some current were running through them, but strangely lacking in vitality, the*

*paintings appear to glow and to grow slowly dim. Their mood is vaguely reminiscent of the subdued histrionics found in tales by Poe. Like the writer's bejeweled but understated prose, these pictures are too restless to be considered languid and too droll to be thought grave; both too reserved and too impious to embrace a single extreme. But still, that balmy scent lingers about them—an air, at once, sepulchral and sickly-sweet, as if ash-colored incense were burning in their vicinity. And still, despite their hushed tone, a pipe organ's pulse—a fugue in a minor key—and some diva's counter-melody echo through the ears, surging, enveloping, before easing out of reach. Forever, that unfinished refrain.*

*In effect, Brauntuch is showing us the coin's other face: having already made the concrete ethereal (dissolving the resolved à la Caravaggio or La Tour), he is now allowing ether to suggest the concrete (resolving the dissolved as in Whistler or Carrière). Once again, we find a seductive, unnerving balance of the seen and unseen; again, we are certain of nothing save that no thing is sure.*

*The paradox can be stated in countless ways—yet we always see the same effect: art that maintains an impartial balance while juggling a variety of voices and viewpoints, a dedicated aloofness while shuffling an array of styles; art that is committed to making no commitment, to being faithless, to taking many stands; art that keeps its audience on the fence, in between, at loose ends; art that asks us to place ourselves in the position of an arbiter who seeks no settlement, of a judge whose task is not to reach a verdict but to set the scales in motion, not to impose measures but, simply, to consider, to weigh.*

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