

Partial Vision

In a recent PBS television series and an accompanying book, art critic, author and cultural pundit Robert Hughes offers his "personal" history of American art.

BY SUZAN BOETTGER

American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America, by Robert Hughes, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997; 635 pages, \$65. The companion eight-hour TV series was broadcast on PBS May 28-June 18 and is available on videotape from PBS Home Video (distributed by Warner Home Video) for \$149.98.

"A love-letter to America" is how Robert Hughes describes "American Visions," his history of the nation's art which appeared last spring as a television series and in book form. Indeed, the John Donne-derived opening chapter title—"O My America, My New Founde Land"—makes it sound like a lovesick paean. But O, he is an ambivalent lover! In the very first sentence—"I have lived and worked in the United States of America for a little more than a quarter of a century now, without becoming an American citizen"—Hughes prominently asserts his independence from his love object. In ensuing episodes and chapters of "American Visions," this Australian who in 1970 came to the United States from Britain to be *Time* magazine's art critic shares both his enthusiasm for what the book's subtitle calls "the Epic History of Art in America" and his disapproval of its current state. And the closer this vision of American art gets to the present, the narrower it becomes and the more Hughes's commentary, often caustic, turns corrosive.

If only for the monumental achievement of creating eight one-hour television programs and then a 635-page book, the author, his producers, publishers and sponsors deserve the appreciation of anyone who cares about having American art reach a wide audience. Following his 1981 television series on modernism, "The Shock of the New," Hughes for years sought support for a history of American art. It wasn't until 1993 that he received funding, ironically from a foreign source, the BBC, whose initiative eventually led to Time Warner's participation. The New York City public television station Thirteen/WNET was also a partner in the production.¹ Like *The Shock of the New* before it, the companion book was published by the prestigious literary house Alfred A. Knopf (in an initial run of 100,000 copies). Containing abundant lush reproductions, and printed on heavy coated paper, it's a substantial tome. Considering the degree of corporate support, it's no surprise that both series and book were given a full PR rollout. By mid-May, one could hardly flip open a periodical or turn on a public television or radio station without encountering a profile, commentary or review of Hughes and his "American Visions."

And the project is presented very much as Hughes's vision. Not only was he its conceptualizer, writer, host and narrator, but at the beginning of both the series and the book he prominently asserts his own subjectivity—claiming a perspective that is not only an outsider's, but one that is, as the title of his 1990 collection of art writing put it, "nothing if not critical." We already know that Hughes considers much of contemporary American culture to be decadent—it's a viewpoint he's been promulgating for years in forms as various as the devilish "satire in heroic couplets" of his 1984 "Sohoiad" in the *New York Review of Books* ("The temper of the age decrees at once/That none may tell the Dancer from the Dunces") to the grave polemic of the three essays published in 1993 as *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*. In the latter, which addressed broad social issues, he complained about how the politicization of the arts and a preoccupation with gendered, racial and ethnic identities has prevented America's rich "diversity of its tribes" from discovering a cohesive "vast common ground." When, that same year, the BBC committed its support to "American Visions," they were signing on with a writer who had moved from the limelight of a clever art critic to the spotlight of a humanist "public intellectual."

While he clearly has an ax to grind, Hughes is canny enough to shroud it in entertainment television's format of imaginative visual and aural editing. The series seems designed to seduce the indifferent viewer who at any moment might be tempted to flip the channel. Within the first two minutes of the initial episode, "The Republic of Virtue," we are immersed in the whirring slot machines and spinning roulette wheels of Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, where Hughes seizes the opportunity to point out how the pseudo-classical columns supporting this "popular palace of middle class sin" belong to an American tradition of adopting classical forms in order to materialize republican ideals.

From the outset, Hughes avoids a lecturer's stance. His liking for declarative bluntness, his passionate confidence and fiendish putdowns ("[Jeff] Koons . . . couldn't carve his name in a tree") display a showmanship natural to TV. To counteract the immobility of art objects, the series takes advantage of the television camera's portability. So when, in the first episode, Hughes discusses early British and Spanish settlers, we hit the road in his open convertible and get a house tour from the current resident of a 17th-century southwest-ern adobe, spend too much time tramping around

living simulacra of colonial villages for excessive details on their lifestyles then (Puritan) and now (Shaker), and see late 20th-century Quakers flee the camera. In between, our host expounds on present-day America's unusual religiosity in comparison to other Western nations. (This is an aspect of what historians call "American 'exceptionalism,'" and one of the underlying themes of the series.) We also hear reminiscences by Amish quilters and attend an auction of their creations while Hughes praises them for "refuting the idea that folk art is just innocent social bird song."

Subsequent installments, each held together by an appropriate theme, approach American art chronologically. "The Wilderness and the West" surveys 19th-century landscape painting from Thomas Cole to Frederic Remington, "Streamlines and Breadlines" follows the tumultuous, style-conscious 1930s up to the machine-age utopian vision of the 1939 World's Fair, and so forth. Throughout the series, as composer David Lord's pulsing phase music—quirky electronic and orchestral sequences—superbly accentuates varying moods, Hughes keeps up the visual pizzazz, interspersing candid incidents such as a public tour of Gilded Age mansions in Newport, Rhode Island, or historical footage of modern ballet danced on the girders of the first, as-yet-unfinished skyscrapers, with corresponding close-ups of John Singer Sargent's portraits or Georgia O'Keeffe's cityscapes.² Amidst a discussion of 19th-century landscape painting, he illustrates America's ongoing identification with the land by turning to present-day "Earth First!" eco-activists whom we see bawling over cut-down trees in a North Carolina forest. This cultist extreme may be a tempting target for Hughes's ridicule, but to use it to represent the evolution from Emersonian transcendentalism to popular environmentalism is deceptive and only serves as an early eruption of Hughes's occasional antipathy for his "new founde land."

Having been written after the peripatetic television show, the lengthy book employs a more sedate tone; it elaborates the script, puts it into straightforward chronology, corrects a few errors and eliminates gratuitous witnesses.³ Here, after 25 years of producing concise journalism, Hughes's creative perceptions are finely-honed into compressed fluency. One typically compelling passage regards Edward Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning* (1930):

You know that this is a slice of life, that the buildings go on beyond the frame, that he has slipped a sense of time into his space without alerting you or implying any sort of narrative. The effect is not portentous, as the "metaphysical" cityscapes of Giorgio de Chirico intentionally were. You are in the real world, but it's a stranger world than you imagined. The screwdriver slips under the lid of reality and lifts it a crack, no more. What's inside? Ask early Auden . . .⁴

Hughes's American "visions" incorporate not only painting, sculpture and architecture, but also furniture, folk art, illustration and commercial design. His analysis thus reflects the ongoing transformation in academia of the study of the history of fine art into the more inclusory field of

October 1997

"visual culture." More specifically, Hughes's interpreting of American art within the social and political contexts in which works were made corresponds to the methodology of progressive Americanists, epitomized by Wayne Craven's substantial 1994 volume, *American Art, History and Culture*. Yet in his examination of fewer artists than in a typical overview, at greater length, and with substantial biographical detail, Hughes's method also exhibits similarities to the "case study" approach of Jonathan Fineberg's 1995 *Art Since 1940, Strategies of Being*. In both video and print, Hughes's accounts of artists' lives take the form of vivid stories enlivened by rhetorical exaggeration and colloquial language: Copley "hemmed and hawed" before deciding not to go to England for training, Peale was "the son of an embezzler," Gilbert Stuart "drank like a fish." These juicy tidbits are not found in dispassionate (and PC) present-day histories but are more in line with the lively biographical details provided by James Thomas Flexner's three-volume 1947 *History of American Painting*. Even the "overriding question" of Hughes's project—"What can we say about Americans from the things and images they have made?"—takes up a search for essential American characteristics that is strongly associated with scholars of the 1950s and '60s, who answered it in works such as Roderick Nash's 1967 *Wilderness and the American Mind* and Barbara Novak's 1969 *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience*.

Hughes follows such historians in emphasizing the importance for American art and design of the pilgrims' fundamentalist religions and their anti-imagery stance. He also reminds us that the spiritual bond of the early settlers with the new world's perilous terrain promoted both pioneer adventurousness and a reverence for sublime nature. These are old stories, but television powerfully dramatizes them when, for instance, Albert Bierstadt's landscape pyrotechnics of scale and atmospheric light are interspersed with aerial swoops over actual verdant mountain majesties and amber waves of grain, accompanied by a heavenly chorale of "America the Beautiful."

Such sentimentality is also productively disrupted by Hughes, who acknowledges its political underpinnings, noting that such grandiloquent landscape painting not only reflected a zeitgeist but "played a considerable role in promoting Manifest Destiny." Hughes is sympathetic to the victims of the young nation's devastating assaults on Spanish and Indian settlements. One could fault him, however, for failing to acknowledge that many African-Americans would also have had a very different experience of the land, particularly those fieldworkers enslaved by plantation owners. Indeed, it's a weakness of the series that there is insufficient representation of images either depicting or made by African-Americans. Both to redress what Albert Boime has incisively termed the "Art of Exclusion," and to address the television audience's diversity, the series could have shown genre scenes of African-Americans by Eastman Johnson, the affecting paternal embrace of Henry Ossawa Tanner's *Banjo Lesson* (1893), the story of the Harlem Renaissance, and Faith Ringgold's contributions to feminist art.⁵ The book, however, devotes a page to

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Robert Hughes poses in front of the Eldon, Ohio, farmhouse depicted in Grant Wood's *American Gothic*; from the sixth episode of "American Visions." Photo Tim Robinson. © BBC Worldwide Ltd., 1996.

contemporary sculptor Martin Puryear.

Also woven between the narrative sequences and Hughes's field trips are occasional clips of interviews with various individuals. These range from the descendants of famous artists to vintage car owners. Oddly, the few professorial talking heads Hughes consults on camera are almost entirely from the disciplines of history and American Studies, rather than art history. For example, while "The West as America," a 1991 National Museum of American Art exhibition investigating how 19th-century art manifested the ideological underpinnings of western expansion, is transparently a source, Hughes passes over the curator and art historians who conceived the show and articulated its premises. For a pithy sound bite, he turns instead to a non-art-historian American studies scholar who is quoted in the "West as America" catalogue.⁶ It's remarkable that although Hughes shares the methodology of Americanist scholars and his history substantially presents the canon they established, he almost never acknowledges art-historical research. In a rare turn to an art historian, Hughes elicits from Robert Rosenblum not, as one might expect, his well-known thesis of the affinities between 19th-century landscapes and Abstract Expressionism, but recollections of a boyhood sneak into the Billy Rose Aquacade at the 1939 World's Fair.

The near total banishment of art historians in the TV series is matched by the omission in the book of footnotes and bibliography. Hughes justifies this

absence by referring to an earlier practitioner of televised art history, Kenneth Clark. The book accompanying Clark's 1969 series "Civilisation" excluded references and was subtitled, "A Personal View." This parallelism is inappropriate: Clark was a scholar who had by then worked with the primary materials of European art history in teaching, curating and publishing for 30 years—he *could* elucidate centuries of art off the cuff. While, in the introduction, Hughes identifies himself as "always opinionated, verging at times on bias," he is a journalist-critic, not a scholar-critic. His detailed histories did not simply pop out of his opinions—he clearly read Flexner, Craven, Novak, Fineberg, the contributors to "The West as America," et al., for his information and also for much of his thematic framework. In his pretense of self-sufficiency, Hughes exhibits a failure to distinguish between primary research and his own insightful visual analysis springing from it. This refusal to acknowledge that he's *not* an outsider, but a member of an intellectual community, displays a sense of grandiosity ironically akin to that for which he has so fiercely criticized Julian Schnabel and others.

Toward the end of the programs, Hughes shows a snapshot of himself in 1970, astride a motorcycle, leather-clad and with tousled hair. Emulating Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, the newly emigrated iconoclast appeared ready to ride roughshod over American art. More than 25 years later, his Rough Rider style occasionally leads to monumental obtuseness, as in his breathtakingly cruel belittling of Barnett Newman's aspirations toward the sublime in the severely pared *Stations of the Cross*. The metaphoric potential of abstraction seems to escape him. Later, in Marfa, Texas, Hughes patrols the endless array of steel boxes in Donald Judd's "temple of esthetic fanaticism," connecting them to the American spirit by their Puritan "denial of the human body" and "reflections of big sky and flat landscape." This kind of literal reading is oblivious to the bodily perception these large forms demand (a point that has been made by Robert Morris and Rosalind Krauss). Non-abstract artists don't necessarily fare any better. The genial Jeff Koons, dressed in a business suit, welcomes Hughes into his studio and is coolly eviscerated for his fatuous pretensions that his huge sculpted kitten refers to the Crucifixion.

The final episode, "The Age of Anxiety," concludes at the rim of James Turrell's *Roden Crater*, allowing Hughes to circle back to the earlier "vision of America as a sublime wilderness." But even the grand scale of *Roden Crater* doesn't prevent Hughes from warning that "inventiveness, that sense of possibility, is flagging badly in America now, as it is in the rest of the world." One can't help wondering how the series might have ended if, instead of referring only to Turrell's now-familiar icon of 1970s-style terrestrial heroics, Hughes had brought us up to date on a wide variety of responses to the American landscape by discussing innovative environmental reclamations such as Patricia Johanson's *Leonhardt Lagoon* (1986) in downtown Dallas or Mary Miss's *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* (1996) in Des Moines.

Hughes has a feel for the angst of Philip Guston's late work, for Richard Diebenkorn's

oceanic expanses and Edward Kienholz's gritty realism, but the living "visionaries" he respects are few (Eric Fischl, Susan Rothenberg), and none seem to have arrived on the scene since his 1984 "Sohoiad." Conspicuously missing is the transformation in the 1950s and '60s of ceramics into expressive sculpture; the '70s feminist art movement's opening up of formalism via pattern and decoration, goddess imagery and performance; the increasing presence of gender and gay issues in diverse formats, and of topics of racial representation. Echoing his *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*, Hughes argues against the current emphasis on identity politics: "What counts in art is the multicultural *person*, the individual who is more complex than his or her origins, and who can speak to the complexities of others." Sounds great, but somehow Hughes's focus on individuals has blinded him to the galvanizing impact that investigations of the social construction of these "origins" have had in bringing forth new American visions—some of which speak to complexities of those who are *really* "others."

Pertinent here is an ideal of Baudelaire's that many critics have taken as a motto: "To be just, that is to justify its existence, criticism should be partial, passionate and political . . ." Hughes is nothing if not that. But Baudelaire continued, "that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view but a point of view that opens up the widest horizons."⁷ By contrast, Hughes's biases, however eloquently expressed, have a constrictive effect. At *Time*, he sits on the summit of middlebrow journalism, affording a view of far and wide. His vision is

passionate and political, but his predominantly dismissive treatment of contemporary art prompts the question, is Hughes still looking? □

1. Other funding for the television series was provided by BMW, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Principal Financial Group, United Airlines and Rosalind P. Walter.

2. It's unfortunate that the didactic thrust of these programs did not extend to identifying the locales of the paintings Hughes discussed. In televising such iconic American works as the anonymous *Mrs. Elizabeth Freake and Baby Mary* (1674), Frederic E. Church's *Rainy Season in the Tropics* (1866) or Willem de Kooning's *Excavation* (1950) against anonymous walls instead of installed in their home museum's galleries, an opportunity was missed to demystify museums and encourage seeing these works in the flesh the next time the family is in, say, Worcester, San Francisco or Chicago.

3. In the book, Hughes corrects the location of Cotapaxi, the volcano Frederic E. Church painted in the 1860s, from Mexico to Ecuador, but continues to give Thomas Cole the mistaken priority as the first painter of the Hudson River region (it was Thomas Doughty), and still seems to believe that Luminism was a self-identification by certain 19th-century marine painters rather than a term applied by John Baur in 1954. To me, the most significant historical misconception was discussing Walter de Maria's *New York Earth Room* as a creation of the late 1970s, which would make it an anomaly during the period when painting was returning to prominence, rather than as a re-creation of a work made in Munich in the "annus horribilis" of 1968. It's also worth noting that the Earth Room was not located in the artist's loft, as Hughes states, but at the Heiner Friedrich Gallery. (The Dia Center for the Arts subsequently assumed its sponsorship.)

4. There follow two quatrains from an Auden poem but if

you ask of the author which poem is being excerpted and where you can read it, he won't tell you. Hughes provides no sources, so the reader's only recourse is to search the "Permissions and Acknowledgments" at the end of the book and guess. Why make things so difficult for the intellectually curious?

5. While Hughes seems to have consulted Albert Boime's *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting c. 1830-1865*, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C., 1991, he overlooked his *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century*, Smithsonian, 1991.

6. The historian Hughes includes is Richard Slotkin, who is quoted by William Truettner, the curator that conceived of "The West as America" and edited the catalogue. Another contributor to the catalogue, Stanford art historian Alexander Nemerov, has publicly objected to Hughes's failure to give credit to the research of others. (See "Hot Type," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 27, 1997.) This followed an intense E-mail debate, posted on the American Art History Discussion List, over the responsibilities and citation rights of scholars, prompted by remarks on "American Visions" by Donald Harington, Allan Wallach and many other Americanists.

7. Charles Baudelaire, "The Salon of 1846, I: What is the Good of Criticism?," Jonathan Mayne, trans and ed., *Art in Paris 1845-1862*, London and New York, Phaidon, 1965, p. 44.

Beginning Oct. 14, Robert Hughes will deliver a series of six lectures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on the themes discussed in American Visions.

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BJORN RYE
PAINTINGS
OCT 16/NOV 16

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