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SOME ENCHANTED EVENINGS: THE PAINTINGS OF ROBERT YARBER

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Over the past decade, in numerous variations of recurrent motifs, Robert Yarber has explored fantasies of flying. Yarber's depictions play off tensions between wonder and decadence. His repeated picturing of couples held midair over a sparkling sky exudes an extravagant longing: to jump off the edge and abandon oneself to the night. But the lurid hues typical of Yarber's sunsets and illuminated cities overlay that impulse with a mood of hysteria. These high-flown fantasies are curbed by compositional strategies displaying an anxious awareness that such hopes can crash. The sublimity of levitation mixes here with sensations associated with the original meaning of the sublime, the awe of nature's grandeur and the dread of its power to overwhelm—to pull one down from the velvety night to the scintillating ground below.

Set at glitzy resorts or high-rise hotels come alive at night, flying themes in Yarber's work began about 1976 with paintings of bodies tumbling through space over orgiastic pool parties. They continued to

glittering coastal metropolis. Most romantic are his visions of a couple clenched in euphoric oblivion, hovering above an urban night (*Regard and Abandon*, 1985, *Errors' Conquest*, 1986). In some, a high horizon line bisects the picture, and clouds radiating from behind the duo anchors them into immobility (*Sleeping Couple*, 1984; *Final Kiss*, 1985) where time—and everything else—floats still.

More frequently, Yarber portrays lovers' leaps as both thrilling and dangerous. Deliberately ambiguous body positions confuse flying, floating, and falling. Often, midair postures suggest precarious levitation, accentuating figures' vulnerability to an imminent Icarus-like plunge into the waters. This is emphasized in the several images where a steeply downward bird's-eye perspective frames billowing figures with pools or coastline below (*Bana*, 1982; *After This Nothing*, 1986). Sometimes the twisted bodies of a couple are only proximate, falling together but not in sync (*Fury*, 1987; *The Speed of Betrayal*, 1987). Occasionally a duo aligns parallel but hardly touching, suggesting a bifurcated projectile shooting across the seashore (*Big Fall*, 1984). Here Yarber contrasts the flyers to a couple viewed boxed within high-rise windows, emphasizing the motif's tangential conflict between confinement and release.

In a previous and blatantly titled work, *Double Suicide* (1982), a duo seen midair outside hotel tower windows—literally "falling in love" but risking life—is juxtaposed to those who stay safely inside, entwined in each other in bed, where death will occur by claustrophobia. At

The nocturnal flights of Robert Yarber's paintings
are the revitalization of myth and personal aspiration
in the obsession of art.

be the dominant theme in his recent solo show at the Sonnabend Gallery, New York. Scenes have included cocktail lounge brawls, deserted hotel corridors, and casino revels where couples wrestle, oblivious to gamblers. Usually, dimly harsh artificial light plays over figures and ground, polarizing the spectrum into coolly fluorescent highlight and shadow in Yarber's signature garish hues. Tensions between fantasies and fears take on sardonic detachment by wacky exaggerations of environmental color, pudgy body types, and slick attire—cutting the passion with Pop vulgarity. At once sublime and ridiculous, these images strongly evoke the yearnings and torments of nocturnal desire.

Art allows such play in the field of desire, and the emotional directness inherent to expressionism especially facilitates an immediacy between imagining and imaging. Now that the past decade's resurgence of attention to painterly figuration has subsided (in part as a rejection of its coarsening into a callow pseudoprimitivism) artists once loosely grouped in the "neo-expressionist" cadre can be individually examined from a broader and less stylistically restricted perspective. Yarber's inclusion in two prime forums for American Neo-Expressionist work, the 1984 Venice Biennale "Paradise Lost/Paradise Regained" and the 1985 Whitney Biennial, as well as numerous other group exhibitions, identified him with that topical genre. But the components of both social commentary and fantastic acts integral to his art make those aspects just as appropriately termed realist and symbolist.

In the past several years, the action in Yarber's pictures has especially focused on couples taking magic flight from bedrooms high above a

other times the split consciousness is personified by one person perching on a balcony railing as if ready to "take the plunge" while the "other half" sleeps inside (*Off*, 1985; *The Tender and the Damned*, 1985; *Release*, 1987). In both earlier paintings, the anguish of these estrangements radiates through the blazing striations of sunset/sunrise. In the recent image, the failure of communication is signaled by the blur of electronic "snow" on the TV screen and the female's withdrawal away from the male leaping from the balcony.

Clearly, repetition is a fundamental characteristic of Yarber's oeuvre. As a body of works the images do not demonstrate a thematic evolution as much as variance in focus and site of aspects of the narrative. Over the years his paintings' dimensions have enlarged and his pictorial strategies have sharpened. The latest work consists of either close-ups of airborne figures so big that their engulfing clutches are duplicated in the overwhelming impact of their life-size scale, or depicts a panoramic urban night with greater detail and expansiveness than before. The intensity of individual images—the emotional, compositional, and painterly attention evident in each—suggests that each represents not one example of a formula schtick, but another attempt to deal with underlying issues, to resolve the multiple ambivalences inherent in his fantasy of flying/falling/floating.

Yarber's airborne figures inhabit a nocturnal terrain that evokes both the temporal milieu of dreaming—the dark—and a dreamlike drama in which the force of gravity carries no weight. Their look of dream scenes is doubled by the impression that these flamboyant scenarios

had to have been "dreamt up." Yet these are not the otherworldly dream-scapes of Surrealism, with their self-conscious metaphysical paradoxes and cohesive style. Rather, Yarber's imagery displays the late 20th-century mélange of visual sources typical of an historically informed artist. Thematic precedents in Baroque and Rococo murals are an obvious inspiration. But rather than a transfigured deity rising from puffy cumulus, Yarber's fantasies of exalted levitation look down onto realistic modernist architecture of the urban scene. Instead of a pastel radiance conveying the bliss of heavenly elevation, garish hues, acute bird's-eye perspectives and radical exaggerations of scale stress the anxiety of this attempt at transcendence. Stylistically, his mode of expressionist directness stimulates an instinctualized brushwork that varies within and between paintings from ragged swaths to daubs with finesse. This is a New Yorker who knows about the putative "death of the author" as a fiction of a centered Self, but who strives, albeit ambivalently, for an authentic subjectivity.

If the deliberateness of Yarber's compositional and painterly strategies contradict analogies to dreamwork, they suggest instead that the act is more like an alert consciousness in a state of reverie. It is a creative process like that described by Gaston Bachelard, in which "The poet retains the consciousness of dreaming distinctly enough to manage the task of writing his reverie."¹ In this sense, Yarber has practiced a form of oneiric "appropriation," adopting a symbol evident in the broad cultural unconscious and adapting it to contemporary visual language.

References to flying/levitating extend far beyond the most obvious span from the Resurrection to Superman. And why not? Gravity is a timeless, universal constraint, as is the desire to break free of it (still only achieved inside cumbersome machines or outer space). Yarber's theme of nocturnal airborne couples connects to the meanings of flying found in myths and biblical stories as well as contemporary dreams and idiomatic language.

The core of this motif's ambiguity stems from the dualistic meaning of flight itself: it suggests both flying and fleeing. Flight is most often associated with upward movement, not just physical levitation but transcendence toward a higher plane of consciousness. Relevant here is Mircea Eliade's description that myths of the "ecstatic experience of ascension, of shamanistic flight, of spirits' astral travel, are noted for their primitivity and universal diffusion."² God is above, in heaven, and in Greek and Roman myths the pantheon lived on Mount Parnassus, with Hermes (or Mercury) their winged messenger. Likewise a winged infant with bows and arrows, Cupid, is the popular sign for being struck by love, or at least infatuation. Daedalus and his son Icarus escaped their imprisonment in Minos' labyrinth by flying upward, an apt metaphor for gaining freedom by rising above the difficulties of consciousness. Historical depictions of biblical stories in turn echo these mythic motifs by adopting them for cloud-level views onto Jesus' transfiguration and resurrection or for the apotheosis of mortal heroes into sainthood, and in commissioned pictures, for depicting patrons elevated into the pantheon. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is represented by a radiant dove on high.

The other impetus of flight is not *toward* but *from* something. The flights portrayed by Yarber do not appear to be acts of fleeing, at least not from an objectified terror. But one of Eliade's comments about the mythic theme of the "Magic Flight" is suggestive. "...[I]n this universe of anxiety and vertiginous speeds it is important to distinguish one essential element: the desperate effort to be rid of a monstrous presence, to free oneself."³ In the context of the self-reflexiveness quintessential of modernity, such flights may be not from an "other" at all. Just as likely, Yarber's figures' repeated leaps into the aerial void describes an effort to flee existential consciousness, and to free oneself of the burdensome presence of self-awareness toward a forgetting of self in free-floating reverie.

Of course the symbolism of flying is not only found in historical periods (mythological, biblical) but pervade the modern vernacular. Contemporary usage combines allusions to "flying" as release—especially into intoxication—with those suggesting the elevated mood of romantic euphoria. Yarber's "highfliers," gamboling in the air in a gamble on love, could be dancing to the rhythms of "fly away with me" or "fly me to the moon." His protagonists perform as corollaries to figures of speech, enacting the heights of passion as they jump into a relationship. But more often, dichotomous compositions emphasize that such

leaps of faith cannot be separated from fears of downfall.

Body language is another common and public sign system, and as kinesthetic experiences are developmentally earlier than verbal constructions, posture can reveal residues of primal feelings. Physical gestures and facial expressions are instrumental to expressive figuration, and Yarber uses these to convey the grand sense of omnipotence of flying without wings or airplane, and the most prevalent physical fear, that of falling. In infants, fear of falling or of being dropped elicits the most archaic phylogenetically imprinted response, the Moro reflex, an extensor movement in which both arms, half extended at the elbows, are spread apart, as are the fingers. Several of Yarber's images depict airborne figures in that outstretched posture; the figures' nonfocused facial expressions occasionally suggest a self-absorbed blissful trance but more often appear as dispassionate observers of the heightened experience.

But the most obvious analogous language is the language of dreams. Dreaming is another form of thinking in imagery and the one that most directly manifests regressions to primal feelings. As Paul Ricoeur puts it, succinctly, "the realm of dream-fantasy is the realm of desire."⁴ As a corollary, Ricoeur describes the artistic fantasy as a "daytime nocturnal..."⁵ Interpretations of contemporary dreams of flying, falling, and floating offer striking insights into Yarber's motif.

The sense of power and thrust characteristic of a dream of unaided flight lends it its most common meaning, that of sexual potency.⁶ Yarber's association of flying with being in a couple—and sexually coupling—predominates within his oeuvre, reinforcing this interpretation of the sexual nature of the flights. In several paintings the airborne duo embraces in midair postures resembling lying on a bed or other flat surface, or motionlessly hovering. In some of these, such as *Regard and Abandon* (1985), the exaggerated thickness and stiffness of the male's trunk and extended legs suggest an erection visually displaced onto limbs.

Images where couples appear closest, hugging each other almost as if nestling, evoke an urge to physically merge with each other, and to float together, as if "above it all." The feeling recalls a characteristic of the related dreams of falling and floating "... the impulse to give up, let oneself go, regress, or fall away from effort and responsibility."⁷ As this desire to "let go" can also be opposed by anxiety about falling, falling dreams epitomize an ambivalent desire for something both wished for and feared, relevant to the ambiguity of tension and repose in Yarber's flying figures. But even more pertinent is the convergence of flying, falling, and floating sensations in the following description:

Clinical inspection of typical flying dreams usually reveals that flying is experienced by the dreamer as an active or passive, swimming-like motion, with a sense of floating or weightlessness. The seemingly ubiquitous dream or fantasy of flying is one of being able to float in the air weightlessly, perhaps as the fetus floats in matching specific gravity amniotic fluid.⁸

This suggests that integral to the unconscious wish to fly is a latent oceanic feeling, a breakdown of the ego's autonomy from the id that ruptures one's sense of existential separation and produces a euphoric merging of the self and environment. The urge has been analyzed as "an attempt symbolically to remove the tension (gravity) in all life and to return to an intrauterine nondifferentiated state."⁹ This sense of "oneness" is like that in mystical experience and is related to the early infant/mother fusion prior to the awareness of being an "Other," a separate identity. Thus in Yarber's image the union of self and Other in the sky extends to a union of self and mother, or self and Great Mother, or self and cosmos.

Significantly, Yarber's depiction of being one with the universe shows a nocturnal world, "night" symbolizing the primigenial chaos preceding the daylight of Creation, the confusion of the unknown before the clarity of enlightenment. The night and the moon, mythically associated with femininity, can in these primal associations also be considered maternal—as Milton phrased it in *Paradise Lost*, "the wide womb of uncreated night." Again, the vibrant milieu of the night sky indicates that the desired union is not simply with a sexual Other. Furthermore, as much as the sky, the duos are drawn to pools or coastlines, and bodies of water, because of their biological associations with the evolutionary source of life as well as the amniotic fluid, intimate a regressive pull back to maternity and primal beginnings, that of civilization, of embryonic life, and of preconsciousness.



Robert Yarber, *After This, Nothing*, 1986. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 132". Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery.

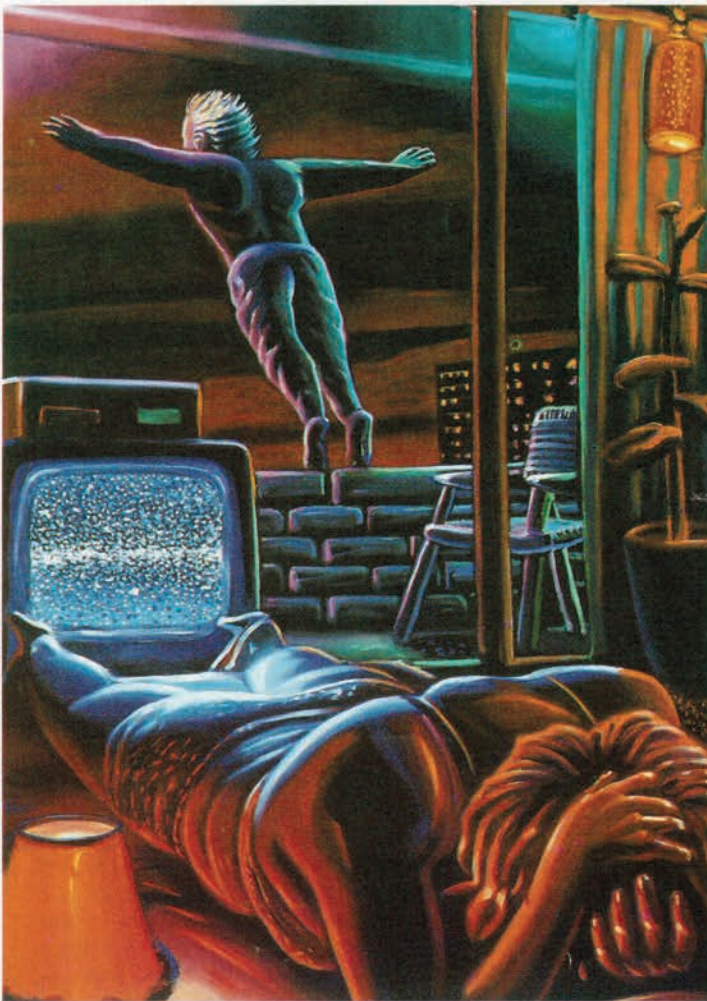
Robert Yarber, *Fury*, 1987. Oil on canvas, 7 x 10'. Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery.





Robert Yarber, *Error's Conquest*, 1986. Oil on canvas, 6 x 11'. Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery.

Robert Yarber, *Release*, 1986. Oil on canvas, 84 x 60". Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery.



The symbolic and visual density of Yarber's painting presents resonant images that bring archaisms forward. He has connected to a motif embracing wide-ranging symbolic allusions found in other pictorial and literary manifestations of the unconscious. And yet Yarber's paintings have been constructed, deliberately and thoughtfully, in the light of consciousness if not literally by day. His images are peculiarly contemporary because of the neonesque colors and the raunchy figuration but even more so because his grand desires for union of self with Other, and of both with the Cosmos, are laden with fear, and with the flight of self from self-consciousness. They unite eros and Thanatos. The motif projects a passionate desire to risk annihilation for these ecstatic unions—with self/other/cosmos—and the terror of doing so and crashing down to the very material ground below. Profoundly ambivalent, the imagery can be seen as hysterical both in the sense of their vehemence and humor. Yarber plays these tensions off one another—and off the viewer—as he does the caricatured figural types against the sparkling panorama, and the facile drawing that dematerializes their lumpen bodies into lurid lightning bolts of hyperkinetic energy against the transcendent themes.

One reason Neo-Expressionism exhausted its public may have been the superficiality of artists' desires, a poverty in ability to imagine, to connect with deep sources of the imagination. Related is the *au courant* focus on the difficulty of authenticity and the prevalence in culture of "simulacra." Self-conscious appropriation is rampant, but as Yarber's work demonstrates, it need not be from contemporary media-generated commodities. His theme of nocturnal flying resonates with an undercurrent of associations both archaic and modern, and, accordingly, manifests broadly shared desires. In a profound sense, Yarber has practiced appropriation—of the archaic, the cosmic, and the oneiric—and made them speak again through the artistic. □

1. Gaston Bachelard. "The 'Cogito' of the Dreamer." *The Poetics of Reverie*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, p. 159.
2. Mircea Eliade. "Symbolisms of Ascension and 'Waking Dreams.'" *Myths, Dreams, Mysteries*. New York: Harper Colophon, 1975, pp. 99-122.
3. Eliade, p. 103.
4. Paul Ricoeur. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 91.
5. Ricoeur, p. 162.
6. Felix Marti-Ibanez. "The Icarus Complex." *M.D.*, V. 15, No. 11, (1971), p. 12.
7. Leon J. Saul and George C. Curtis. "Dream Form and Strength of Impulse in Dreams of Falling and other Dreams of Descent." *International Journal of Psych-Analysis*, V. 48 (1967), p. 282.
8. Emanuel C. Wolff. "Flying—Some Psychoanalytic Observations and Considerations." *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, V. 37 (1982), p. 475.
9. Wolff, p. 481.