Olivier Richon
Still Life and Allegory

What kinds of information or knowledge are necessary to understand a work by Olivier Richon? The objects within each image are familiar to us: animals, books, foods, reassuringly solid and familiar. On this level, the images are immediate, accessible. The fact that the staged photographs draw on the subject matter, composition and lighting of still life painting adds to a sense of familiarity. On the other hand, Richon's titles, and the books he includes within the images, introduce myriad allusions: to art history, literature, and post-structuralist theory. We may think we know about oysters, or gargoyles, or whippets, but fragments of loaded language invite us to dredge up all our critical and historical associations, and sift through them to see which might be appropriate. The tension then, is between different kinds of knowledge, in part a push-pull between image and language, natural and conventional signs. As Ernst Gombrich put it, describing the "Beware of the Dog" mosaic found in Pompeii: "…To understand the notice you must know Latin, to understand the picture you must know about dogs."[1]

Throughout his career, Richon has sustained an interest in allegory, which enters the work bearing baggage from the history of painting as well as from more recent discussions about photography. Allegory involves saying something while sustaining a parallel discourse. Things are what they are, and are something else as well. Sometimes allegory uses one-to-one correspondence of objects. In allegorical still life, individual objects traditionally serve to evoke the five senses, or as emblems pointing to particular ideas or identities, or as reminders that we must die. In *Literary Still-Life*, Richon plays on the allegorical potential of a fifteenth-century gargoyle, a winged goat's head made of limestone. Juxtaposing the object with volumes of Rousseau and Sade, two of the Enlightenment's most savage critics of religion, the artist heightens the pagan origins of the church sculpture, and its associations with fertility and sacrifice. In *Ecclesiastical Still Life*, the animal aspect of the gargoyle is sublimated by a puddle of grey velvet. The object becomes baroque, mysterious, and tastefully classical. It speaks, among other things, of the church's ability to absorb and transform any symbol that comes its way.

Lest we get too invested in a particular reading of a particular photograph, it seems worthwhile to mention that four of these six images were made as commissions or responses, in which the artist was invited to make use of elements assigned to him. Suddenly the idea that any given component is significant collapses, and an Olivier Richon becomes a set of operations, formal and critical, that might be enacted on a range of possible objects.

In the 1980s, critic and historian Craig Owens put allegory at the center of his model of postmodernism.[2] As he saw it, artists such as Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine used photography to mimic, borrow and transgress familiar modes of image-making, leaving obvious traces of artifice (Roland Barthes' "third meaning") and disjuncture to signal their intent to the viewer. For Owens, such work offered an overarching allegory or metanarrative for the pleasures and perils of representation. There were many advantages to Owens' model: it claimed a seriousness and political efficacy for photographic art, and it posited an active, critical audience, with a stake in the production of the meaning of the artwork.

The current climate of exaggerated eclecticism, ambiguity and ambivalence in art can be seen as a reaction to the certainty that deconstruction could empower audiences and

fatally destabilise dominant paradigms. Or perhaps postmodernism worked. And the current climate of openness is in fact a kind of freedom, to take account of the past—or not, to embrace political ideas—or not. Richon's works participate fully in the allegorical impulse as described by Owens. As allegories of looking, thinking, desiring, they refer to the activities we perform while looking at the work, and invite our active participation in the problematic act of interpretation. Sometimes these works feel like an allegory of the failure of some of the inflated claims made for postmodernism.

Richon's works can create a certain anxiety for the viewer or critic. They generate a sense of intimidating erudition and complexity, which under close analysis turns out to follow the logic of a dream. Allegory is sometimes described as a compulsive mode, in which the artist's need to produce a doubled text in turn compels the reader to perform an act of interpretation.[3] When I first encountered Richon's work, in about 1990, I imagined that somewhere there was an educated audience with the insider knowledge to translate every Latin inscription, recognise every mythological or iconographical reference, and thus perform a complete exegesis in which the work would unzip and expose itself fully. Today, I am still tantalised by the work's refusal to be consumed all at once. Parts of it make sense to me, while parts remain stubbornly obscure, like some codex or artefact left behind by a lost civilization.

As head of Photography at the Royal College of Art, Richon's position is that of the artist/academic/writer, playing within the landscape of ideas and images which he inhabits. This is art for artists, art for art historians, art for those hungry to be on the inside of culture. The works speak of a love of culture and a belief in the kinds of value that are learned rather than innate. The images themselves may be seductive, but their real pleasure lies in the inconclusive process of interpretation. Thus the work is academic in the best possible sense. The academy has changed enormously since the avant-garde decided to spit in its eye in the mid-nineteenth century. While art schools and universities are still bound to tradition, to certain standards of teaching, to texts about what art is and ought to be, the seriousness of the enterprise relies on self-criticism and the ongoing necessity for subversion. Art made for or within an academic context can indeed be about discipline, order and control, but can also embody a deep dis-order. The compulsions of the academic artist have a refinement that is matched by the exigent and even decadent taste of the academic viewer. It's an insider game, with its own special pleasures that are not about buying and selling, or even about beauty and pleasure. Artists who teach and write constitute the academy more meaningfully than do the actual institutions. They have the unique power to shape the minds and eyes of their own audience.[4]

Allegory has been maligned at various moments as artificial and elitist. It often relies on rhetoric and fiction to point beyond initial appearances. An opposing view would defend allegory as an earthy mode, always grounded in objects, in the senses, and in the past. While symbols may point to the great beyond, allegory always returns to the concrete. Courbet was very fond of allegory, and wanted to pin it even more closely to the everyday, by calling his great studio self-portrait a "Real Allegory." On some level, the artist compelled to work allegorically has no choice but to reflect his moment. As Fredric Jameson puts it, allegory can be understood as "a cultural and historical symptom rather than as one intellectual option among others."[5]

Richon's carrot and oyster operate differently from the studio photographs in the series. These are simple objects, everyday objects, if one is the sort of person who eats carrots

and oysters. Richon has photographed them simply, frontally, in natural light, reflected on the elegant lustre of his kitchen counter. Presenting the lone root vegetable and mollusk in this way, the artist evokes the tropes of nineteenth century realist painting. This is an authentic oyster, an honest carrot, unembellished, and purged of the allusions to convention and tradition that seem to accompany the studio arrangements. But if these two pictures evoke the visual tropes of realism, do they have anything to do with its political message? In Zola's novel, *L'Oeuvre*, the realist painter who serves as his protagonist declares, "the day is coming when a single original carrot will be pregnant with revolution."[6] Richon's carrot and oyster look very contemporary, of their own time, but their engagement with social issues seems to be a rather wistful look back at a moment in time when artists might have believed (as they did again in the 1980s) that certain strategies of representation could alter and improve a viewer. In fact, the single original carrot is, all at once, lovely, pathetic and slightly obscene. This carrot may not radicalise us, but it can lead us in contemplation of that potential.

[1] Ernst Gombrich, "Image and Code: Scope and Limits of Conventionality in Pictorial Representation," in *Image and Code*, ed. Wendy Steiner (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Studies in the Humanities, no. 2, 1981), p 18.
[1] Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, Parts 1 and 2", first published in *October* 12 and 13 (Spring and Summer, 1980), reprinted in Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 52-87.
[1] Angus Fletcher, "Psychoanalytic Analogues: Obsession and Compulsion," in *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), pp. 279-303.
[1] Recent writings by Richon include "Image and Discourse," in Yve Lomax, ed. *Images of Thought*, vol. 1 (London: Salvo, 2000), and "Three Essays on Photography," in Olivier Richon, *Allegories* (London: Salvo, 2000).
[1] Fredric Jameson, "Criticism in History," in *The Ideologies of Theory*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 128.
[1] Émile Zola, *L'Oeuvre*, quoted in Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 33. I am grateful to the artist for this reference, in conversation 3 March, 2004.

Lucy Soutter
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