Don Nice

A 20 Year Survey

Eleanor Flomenhaft
Curator

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Fine Arts Museum of Long Island
Hempstead, New York, 11550

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Contents

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Don Nice has been included in hundreds of theme exhibitions, as a watercolorist, a realist, a super-realist, a Pop artist and a modern day iconographer with a propensity for utilizing classical and primitive motifs. Like a chameleon, he might be seen in all of these roles or none of them. This is the first Don Nice exhibit which allows the viewer to survey his art in all its richness, intelligence and complexity as he developed it over the last twenty years.

It took the cooperative endeavors of many people and institutions to make this exhibit possible: Don Nice, first and foremost who was my partner from the outset; Nancy Hoffman and her gallery staff, who helped track down works and supplied photographs; Donald Kuspit, whose inspiring essay gives poetic voice to Nice's art; Rhoda Barkin, my special assistant for all exhibition projects who smoothes the way for all concerned; Mary Ann Wadden for expediting publicity, and the entire museum staff for their attention to every detail.

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On behalf of the Board of Trustees of the Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, we thank you for all your splendid efforts on behalf of our project.

The Fine Arts Museum of Long Island
Hempstead, NY 11550

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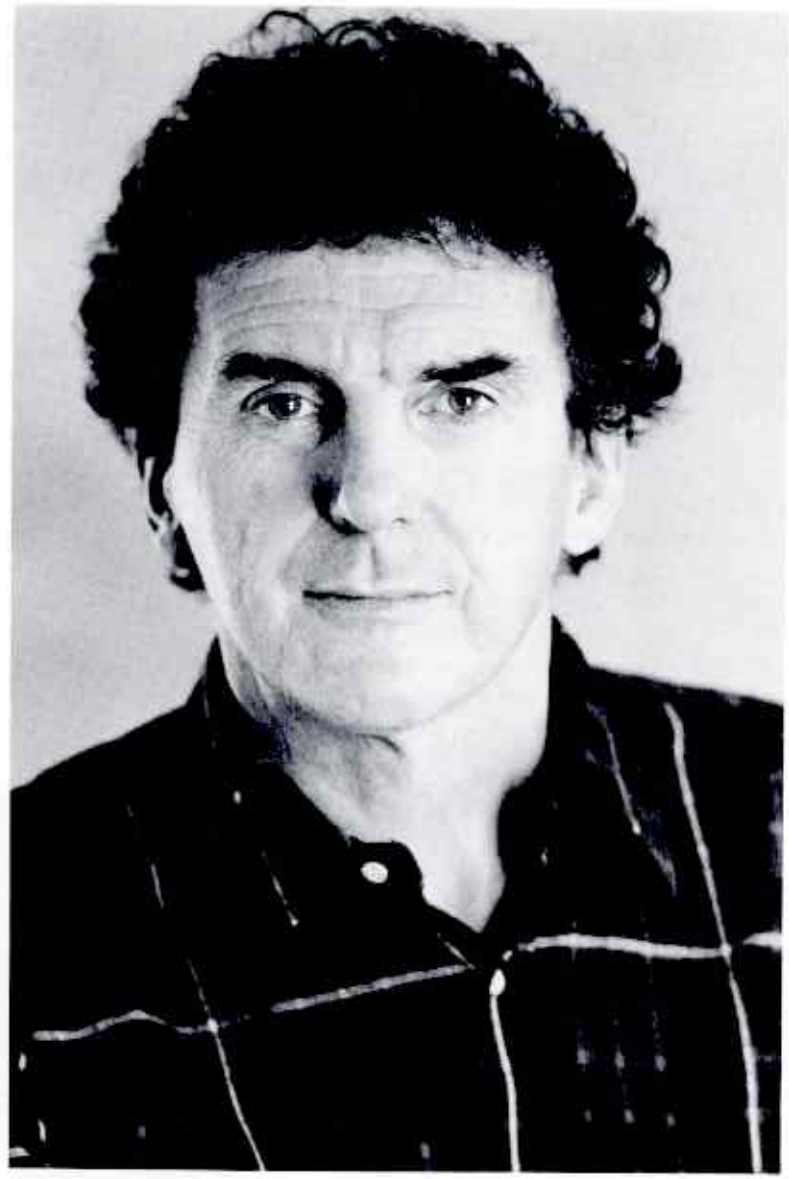

An Introduction to The Art of Don Nice

by Eleanor Flomenhaft

Traditionally artists have negated what preceeded them in the ascent to their full powers. Abstractionists disallowed Realism. Symbolists and Expressionists were sworn anti-historicists and Action Painters rejected Constructivism. At first glance this tendency seems to follow for Don Nice who, after a brief foray into Abstract Expressionism, developed his particularized style which is most often defined as realistic. Certainly mimetic portrayals of nature dominate his *oeuvre*. But Nice's art is much more complex than appears at first glance. Although visibly accessible, it is hardly simple.

Despite critics' inclination to characterize artists, Nice has carefully eluded the pigeon-hole. He says, "I am part of Pop Art, but on the edge, and part of the Realist movement on the edge."[1] Indeed there are many salient affinities which Nice shares with both groups. For example, inasmuch as he considers himself "aligned with high art and with folk art," he is linked to Pop. As art-historian, Harold Rosenberg noted, "In Pop, America's two cultures, highbrow and popular, meet on the neutral ground of technique. . . . . [Further] The extinction of content in Pop enabled it to treat in equal fashion a sunset by Turner and a Shell Oil sign."[2] Surely, one is hard put to think of a contemporary artist who has combined alpine motifs with objects from the quotidian environment more glibly and impartially than Don Nice. He flirts too with Minimalism, a development which occupies an elusive place, like many of his object works, somewhere between painting and sculpture.

Nice's essential statement as an artist actually lies in the way he differs from those with whom he is most consistently identified. Of course, communication is basic to Pop, as it is for Nice. In addition, while doffing their caps at Dadaism in the arbitrary choice of subject matter, Pop artists draw their images from the mass culture. However, they are primarily interested in establishing a dialogue between the viewer and the painted surface (art for art's sake), whereas Nice's chief concern is the communication of ideas. Although he has been known to say that "painting is about painting," and he leaves the edges of his landscapes unfinished, revealing his toil while simultaneously asserting that art is not reality, he most admires artists who deal with ideas, who express something essential. In fact, when viewing his work, it is often difficult to disentangle the artist from the *ideiste*. Therefore his shift from Abstract Expressionism (in the sixties) to Realism was almost inevitable.

Yet Nice, now regarded—because of his fidelity to image and detail—as one of America's outstanding Realists, is not a Realist *per se*. We have but to see his Surreal larger-than-life images of animals (such as the *Jack Rabbit*), vegetables (for example, a huge *Turnip*), as well as his mammoth *Grapes*, all of which distance the beholder while eliciting an emotional response; or observe the precise grid scaffolding which sheathes his two quintessential works, *The Peaceable Kingdom* and *Beasts and Demons*, each nine by thirty-six feet, and consider his constructions which are both objects and images, folk-craft and art, to realize that he aspires to be located apart from both the Pop or Realist slots.

Early on the need to express ideas in paint had also quickly distanced Nice from the introspective world of Abstract Expressionism. Action Painters, such as Jackson Pollock, wished no steps between their raw feelings and the viewer; automatism and archetypal forms, the basic language of intuitive art, became the underpinnings of their subjective works. But Nice required objects from the real world as vehicles for the exposition of his ideas. Although, like Pollock, self-discovery is essential to Nice, reason has been his *vis a tergo* whereas emotion was Pollock's. "Things" became the intermediaries between Nice's cherished concerns and the viewer. They privatize his personal world.

Nice, born in California in 1932, has been painting for as long as he can remember. As a youth he spent long hours capturing impressions of the western landscape at the side of his aunt, Madeline Wieman, who was an accomplished watercolorist. While at High School near the Sequoia National Park, he took a correspondence course in art. Because he had no contact with contemporary art in his formative years—with no museums or galleries near his home—he painted what was at hand. Subsequently he attended the University of Southern California (USC) on a football scholarship. Although practice precluded formal studio courses, Nice sketched constantly, and he studied art education so that he would be prepared to earn a living, after college days, in a field which related to his life's work. After graduation, he did get a position teaching art to juvenile delinquents although he was hired more for his skills as a football player than as an artist. With the advent of the Korean War, he was drafted for service, but happily managed to maneuver himself into a job as ceramics instructor at Fort Ord, where he created a fourteen foot mural for the mess hall, of soldiers cleaning guns and peeling potatoes. In addition he got a second teaching job at a nearby college, set up his own studio, and started showing at a gallery in Carmel. During this period he could finally frequent art galleries in San Francisco. There for the first time, he came to grips with the avant-garde art scene, which provided fascinating material for his journals. Nice has been a prodigious diarist in journal form. Hundreds of these notebooks are stored in his studio, each filled with drawings and fleeting impressions in watercolor and collage.

From 1957-'60 he studied art seriously in Europe. His first teacher in Florence, Italy, was the Italian Abstract Expressionist, Afro Basaldello (who chose to be known only by his first name to distinguish himself from his sculptor brother, Mirko). "At first, my works looked very much like Afro's," says Nice. Salzberg, Austria was his next stop, where he studied with Oskar Kokoschka at his school of painting. From 8:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. students worked in watercolors directly from the model. Once Kokoschka caught Nice sketching the model first and broke all his pencils. Salzberg was exhilarating for Nice. After painting all day, he read only about art and discussed only subjects that related to art. He was able to experience that special *elan vital* that artists, at fortuitous times, can have with each other.

In 1958, Nice saw the huge eye-opening exhibit that the Museum of Modern Art circulated to eight countries. He was captivated. The artists of the New York school had so much vitality. "They were on a search." He realized that he should be back in America where all the excitement was happening. When he returned in 1960, he "painted through all those people". But his romance with Action Painting was short-lived. In the early sixties, his aim was to find his way back to an archetypal shape which had relevance in it. But a "thing" kept imposing itself on the canvas. Each time this happened, Nice would try to wipe it out, to no avail. The object refused to be submerged. "I was trying to make a thing of the whole canvas and here I had a thing which continued to come through. "Finally, he decided to retain the "thingness" of the object within the painting as well as the "thingness" of the painting itself. This birthed his architectonic format. Through the manipulation of various forms and shapes, he created one object.

"Thingness" had forced itself on Nice because he needed it. It is not thingness of objects as Tony Smith viewed it, as the mystery or inscrutability of the things. Nor is "Thingness" for Nice an object's concrete qualities, its material or (as in Donald Judd's objects) its shape. Things from the real world that form on his canvases are the pictographic syntax with which he advances his views. They achieve additional meaning in the three-dimensional "objecthood" of his constructions.

Because "objecthood" for Nice was never intended as an end in itself, rather as another tool in his personal quest, he manages a triumphant escape from the pitfalls of Minimalism, according to art-critic, Michael Fried's view. Fried sees the Minimalist enterprise, in which materials and shapes are their identity, as highly problematical, and feels that their objects degenerate proportionately as they approach a "theatrical presence."[3] Conversely, "The success. . .of the arts (writes Fried) has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre."[4] Nice's case is merely one of an artist appropriating historical data from the Minimalists' experience as he goes along his merry way. He has that particular faculty for finding substance in the syntax of any and all art developments which stamp their particular imagery on history's record. His borrowings from the Minimalists as from Pop, Realism (including Edward Hopper's early mandate for the isolation of objects) and Mondrian's Cubist grid, are enlisted freely for his own imagery, ever-demanding new forms to contain it. Insofar as the ingredients borrowed from the Minimalists are Nice's means, not his dogma, he ducks both their classification and their hurdles.

Nice's subjects may be animals, fruit and vegetables, or objects from his environment such as sneakers, coke bottles, candy bars in their torn wrappers, sun-glasses, golf bags, a single rose or a gorgeous landscape. The objects are often amassed in framed cornucopias and borders, or grouped in precisely outlined predellas. Individual animals and landscapes are sometimes depicted alone in square, round or rectangular surrounds, and at times, animals cutouts are affixed to the top of a painting or construction.

A disjunctive relationship between single objects and units is a key factor in Nice's work. Within his structures all objects are equal, and are treated evenly (as the Zen see it, yes is no). On the picture plane, articulated with landscapes, animals and objects, all things, as he spells it out, have been reduced to the same lack of emotional significance. Carefully picked, each object stands for something. For example, each landscape is an overidealized place. It is one that everyone wants to see, but precisely because of that, has lost its romance. Decals, which immediately sound the note of the ordinary, were chosen because they were already processed to the point that Nice could deal with them as images. These are no horns of plenty. Instead, they are obsessively overused objects which have lost their original identity. Nice bemoans the fact that processing and over-idealization make objects properties of America in the same way that sneakers, coke bottles or ice-cream cones have become properties of our culture.

By overgeneralization, Nice sees ordinary objects from the mass culture eventually becoming America's archetypal images. Long fascinated with archetypal connections, he eagerly plucks referents from every age and civilization. He calls many of his compositions totems. Stylistic features of Christian art—triptychs, predellas and cornucopias—are staples in his format, and his most recent cornucopias, in their density, evoke a prominent characteristic of medieval art, the *horror vacuii*. The conceptual skin which he imposes on many of his works hearken back to Mondrian's cubist grid and in a linear path wends its way through Andy Warhol's systemic Pop works and Agnes Martin's seductive grid paintings. Moreover, by utilizing objects bound to our time but with historical motifs, and stripped of poetic references to the point that they have become symbols, Nice's art gains a new dimension thematically as well as spatially. With the deft interplay of past and present, and using a deceptively simple framework, Nice has found a unique way with which to transcend the boundaries of time.

Philosophically, Nice's vision of things is closest to Romanticism. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Romantic artists sought escape from the fragmentation of society, as a result of the Industrial Revolution. At the *fin-de-siècle*, Expressionists, whose roots are in the Romantic Movement, sought their own paradise lost and renewed links to their spontaneity in primitive and folk art, which included that of children, the closest human beings to the instinctive primitive state. Nice dreads the demise of nature's innate beauty (as a result of over idealization, over commercialization, over-kill), and conveys these feelings by tapping memories of every child's most common nightmares. With oversized surreal objects from our everyday world—blown up figures of rabbits, grapes and turnips—he rekindles fears we all shared, and which Lewis Carrol captured in his remarkable tale of Alice in Wonderland. Would we grow up too tall or too small?

Perhaps because Nice is a romantic, the need to rediscover himself is inevitable. At this time, when he can paint objects—for which he has become famous—with his eyes closed, he is about to cast many of them in bronze. With this method, or ceremonial rite, he is retiring them from his arsenal of images. Other changes are taking shape on his canvases too. Objects, which he previously set against a white ground are now portrayed against color. Borders, which heretofore enclosed, separated and delineated between his paintings and the space beyond, are now slivers of a landscape. Suggestive rather than ideational, they allude to endless expanses beyond. In addition, whereas he used to paint from preliminary sketches, Nice is now painting from memory. And, long known as an outstanding watercolorist, he is now more challenged by oils, with particular interest—as in his Abstract Expressionist days—in the paint itself and surface textures. Not coincidentally, he is beginning to emphasize meaningfulness in his painting. In keeping with this more subjective attitude, he is re-examining his abstract period. There is a reintroduction in his art of archetypal forms and the geometric imagery of Eskimo, African, Indian and Etruscan art, which he abstracts according to mood.

Nice's most recent canvases and constructions, created at a distinct remove from the current fashions, invite admiration. Stylistic features which he mines over and over, such as cut-out forms populated by landscapes and animals, are never stale. In fact, they encourage a swift entry into his universe, which is as carefully designed as it is artless. To be creative and free within a limited world is an arduous task. Yet this is Nice's choice and he achieves it with remarkable panache. At all times he is buoyed by enormous technical virtuosity and by his ability to reconcile iconography from the historic continuum, his childhood world and the immediate moment.

Notes are:
1. from author's interview with artist, March 1984.
2. Harold Rosenberg, *The De-Definition of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 108-111.
3. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", *Aesthetics Today*, Selected Readings edited by Morris Philipson and Paul J. Gudel (New York and Scarborough, Ontario). A Meridian Book, New American Library, 1980) pp. 214-239.
4. An abridged version of this essay originally appeared in *Arts Magazine*, Summer 1984, under the title "New Paintings of Don Nice."