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## *Edward Hopper and the Geometry of Despair*

FROM *Boulevard*

BLESSED IS THE ARTIST who finds one small thing that is entirely his own, an individual whose work projects a personality so distinct he becomes an adjective. Kafkaesque paranoia and Rubenesque girth, Rabelaisian humor and Shavian wit, the Caravaggisti's light and the Pre-Raphaelites' point of departure: these expressions acknowledge an essence so dense it resembles a bouillon cube. Familiarity to this degree, unfortunately, is largely based on presumption. As predictable as each of these artists seem, one can only imitate them in outline; the particulars of their art often prove surprisingly flexible.

The same dilemma holds true for the American painter Edward Hopper. Everyone thinks they know Hopper because they so quickly recognize him. How far the figment lies from the fact was apparent in an exhibition of the artist's work that recently traveled across the United States. Multiple Hoppers reveal the consistent concerns he pursued by varying means throughout his career.

With Hopper, context is everything. "Where" defines his people more indelibly than "who." This has led many critics to stress the national character of the localities he painted, a diminishing assessment that makes the artist seem like Norman Rockwell's dour second cousin. Nothing could be further from the truth; Americana held no interest for this American. Hopper's innate reticence prompted him to qualify any popular culture references

he included in his work. In *Circle Theater*, for instance, a looming subway exit eclipses most of the theater's marquee; the title alone allows us to interpret the cryptic *C* and *E* that flank the black structure rising before us. The bedraggled flappers who appear in Hopper's work run counter to the popular stereotype; we see them sullenly stirring coffee by themselves in automats or dully chatting together in cheap Chinese restaurants, with nary a hip flask or jazz band in sight. Hopper was attracted to the theater and portrayed it often, but somehow in these scenes it's always intermission. The evening's illusion is kept safely behind a heavy curtain as Hopper studies the audience: the balding men and haggard women who don their boiled shirtfronts and ermine wraps in the hopes of losing themselves for a few hours in an imitation of life. It is the spectators who have become the spectacle.

This indirection is essential to Hopper's temperament as an artist; far from indulging the comfortable myths about his country, the man sought to circumvent them. In *New York Movie*, the titled film appears as an incoherent black-and-white fragment on the extreme left. Hopper focuses instead on the periphery of the main event, where a young woman in an usher's uniform slumps in boredom beneath a dim exit lamp. Administering society's diversions is anything but entertaining. In *Girlie Show*, a nude distinctly past her prime traipses out on a bare stage with a transparent veil trailing behind her. Her audience consists of a few anonymous male heads in the darkness at her feet and the face of a drummer idly awaiting his cue. What makes this painting so unusual is the way Hopper deflates the erotic intent of the scene without resorting to caricature. He doesn't make his stripper ugly; he doesn't need to. Rather than emphasizing the scene's tawdry elements, the artist presents them simply, but at an unresponsive distance. It's the echo of apathy that makes the woman's blighted exhibitionism seem so sad and even a bit heroic.

One only has to compare works like this to the flushed street urchins and slushy urban alleys of Hopper's teacher, Robert Henri, to appreciate how far from the picturesque Hopper resides. The Ashcan school, of which Henri was one of the leading receptacles, use the familiar to establish a camaraderie of experience with their audience. "We know all about this," they signal, and the "we" is fatally presumptuous. Hopper, on the other hand, uses the familiar

to breach the visual complacency the familiar engenders. One is most vulnerable to the surprise that comes barging through the front door.

If America isn't the subject of these American scenes, what is? Anyone acquainted with Hopper's entire oeuvre might be tempted to answer: architecture. Hopper loved buildings and found so much character in them they almost function as faces: the spent gentility of a Victorian façade, the spare sufficiency of a clapboard cottage, the redundant thrust of a brick tenement. In his hands, shutters and sills, pilasters and porticos are as individualizing as noses and ears. Part of the appeal lay in the challenge: architecture is an exercise in logic; like a fugue or an algebraic equation, all the elements must resolve themselves symmetrically. One can fudge the perspective of a mountain or a tree, but because it is largely composed of lines, a building's perspective makes any lapse glaringly apparent. The rigor of an architectural design is so relentless it can easily appear repetitive and boring. Hopper disarmed this shortcoming with his use of sunlight, which further complicated the architectural patterns with patterns of its own, privileging certain planes, creating brilliant shafts and vivid diagonals. Hopper's buildings are so alive because they fracture space in such interesting ways. What one has here is cubism without the theoretical baggage.

How Hopper used light to modify the rigid pattern of simple structures is perhaps best illustrated in his *Early Sunday Morning*. An artist interested in local color would have filled the storefront windows with specific merchandise; Hopper doesn't even replicate the signs, using instead uniform smudges of mustard-colored paint to approximate the dulled gilt stencils on the glass. Neither does he populate this commercial stretch of real estate with a swarm of shoppers. It's interesting to note that initially a figure appeared in one of the second-story windows, but Hopper painted it out. A single cough would have violated the deserted character of the scene; only in the absence of people is their essence captured. The tentative crescendo of morning light that approaches from the right becomes the string that threads the beads and keeps the succession of shops from appearing episodic and monotonous. For all the horizontal sweep in the picture, it's important to note how the artist retards this movement near the picture's center with

a barber pole, a fire hydrant, and the highlighted folds of a furled awning, delaying the eye long enough to give the scene the serenity of a traditional focal point.

The architectural patterns in Hopper's work do more than give it a compositional elegance; they confine the people that inhabit them. Hopper embeds his figures in a relentless grid of rectangles and squares. Bold vertical and horizontal lines slice away huge chunks of any scene. The artist's men and women seem resigned to their compromised space, but not trapped by it; rather the grid is an outer expression of the attitudes they harbor within. *Room in New York* is a perfect example of this approach. We see a man and a woman in a crowded apartment through the confining frame of a brownstone windowsill. Despite the cramped quarters, the couple remain aloof from each other; there is more than a round table separating these two. The man leans forward, not toward the woman but the newspaper that slants before him. The woman faces away from the man, leaning against an upright piano. The position of her knees and elbow makes it clear she doesn't intend to play the instrument. Instead she picks at the keyboard with a single finger, producing the consolations of sound to fill the conversational void. The rectangular panels of the door repeat those of the three framed pictures on the wall, a repetition that becomes the visual equivalent of dull familiarity. The isolation is so enervating that the people seem to have lost their faces in masks of shadow. In this scene, Hopper confounds the voyeur's crime: our stolen glimpse into other people's lives wasn't worth stealing. What we witness is too impersonal to be private, too inert to be engaging. At their most intimate, people are disappointingly themselves.

Hopper seems to be painting pictures in which nothing happens, but this isn't true: nothing doesn't look like this. Just as one projects the essence of emptiness not through silence but a series of echoes, so these scenes are crowded with objects that create a vacuum. In *Room in Brooklyn*, we're inside the apartment looking out, but the shift in perspective doesn't change the emotional climate. The horizontal and vertical lines formed by the three windows divide the available space into a vacant triptych. The central focus of the picture is a white vase of flowers that sits on a small table between two of the windows. The flowers are as vapid as the vase, yet both are made vivid by a shaft of glancing sunlight that provides a warm, sky-blue shadow. It is only after admiring the

flowers that we notice the female occupant on the far right, her slumping head viewed from behind; she seems to be merging with the chair she sits in, just as the chair merges with a rust-colored tablecloth in the right foreground. The woman conforms to the room's overall pattern while the flowers defy it. Hopper's contrast makes his point discreetly: what sort of life can be upstaged by a handful of jonquils?

In *Hotel by a Railroad*, Hopper's bisecting game reaches an extreme; everything in the picture crowds everything else into insignificance. The older couple occupying the hotel room don't appear to be transient: staid to the point of inertia they could be part of the generic, nicked furniture that comes with the room, the dowdy woman in her soiled slip who reads without passion, the gaunt man who looks out the window without interest and smokes without pleasure. As if to confirm our impression, a mirror on the wall reflects only gray emptiness. The confined glimpse of train track visible from the window offers no escape; the man studies it over his spent cigarette with an expression devoid of all expectation; like the attendant in Hopper's *Gas*, he finds himself stuck beside a road that only others will travel.

Hopper's most celebrated use of visual segmenting is *Nighthawks*: his insomniacs occupy an illuminated wedge in a dark, sleeping world. The abandoned shops (*Early Sunday Morning* without the sunlight) that have surrendered to the night create a contrasting backdrop that makes this island of fluorescent light appear all the more detached. The four figures who occupy the restaurant replicate the isolation, defying sleep for no apparent reason: they aren't eating or working or talking. The crouching figure behind the counter is the only one who seems on the point of speaking, but then his paper hat and white frock compromise the gesture: if he speaks, questions are just part of his job. Sartre believed that hell was other people, but Hopper begs to differ by showing four who are completely alone together. If there's a concession stand in hell that sells coffee and pie, this is it.

Hopper once said, "It took me about ten years to get over Henri." Elsewhere, he said, "It took me ten years to get over Europe." These statements might lead one to assume there was a lot of unrequited love in the artist's temperament. I think instead it reveals a key aspect of Hopper's approach: his was a world less of omission than deletion. Like a great chess master, the man showed

a willingness to make huge sacrifices a part of his strategy. In *Second Story Sunlight*, the two figures who comprise the focus of the scene occupy only the central third of the painting; the third on the right shows an anonymous forest, the third on the left, the shaded side of the building. A full third of *Seawatchers* is taken up by the dark side of a cottage, a space only relieved by a laundry line with three flapping beach towels. Beside Hopper, other painters appear unduly cluttered. This was no compositional quirk on the American's part; it allowed him to keep his figures at a dispassionate distance. The painter usually remains far enough away from his people for us to see their legs; the close-up wasn't a technique he favored.

Hopper's tendency to cede large tracts of his pictures gave him another expressive tool: he could interrupt a scene by superimposing something unrelated before it. The most famous example of this is *House by the Railroad*, where his staid Victorian mansion is abruptly cut off at the knees by a rusting horizontal line of train tracks. Hopper was unusually fond of this device and many of his pictures are bisected by the railroad. We never see the trains, but their implacable paths are enough to signal the authority of a new order.

Interrupting a picture in this way also allows the artist to get behind the façades he recorded so meticulously. In Hopper's wonderful watercolor *Skyline Near Washington Square*, we see a solitary brownstone rising above the functional detritus of a roof. The contrast between the official face of a building and the vents and chimney pots that make it work couldn't be starker. This unsightly foreground blocks our view of the lower floors of the brownstone; Hopper compromises our impression of the building even further by angling it so we see the abrupt blank of the side wall, a contrast that makes the ornate front appear all the more facile. Nothing undermines the illusion of a mask like the prominent ears and neck of the head hiding behind it.

Hopper's paintings can seem far simpler than they are because they communicate so directly, but the artist frequently adds elements that threaten to disrupt the impression he creates. One example of this is how colorfully he paints the drabest scenes. The deep saturated hues Hopper favored resemble early Technicolor films: assertive reds, vibrant purples, glaring yellows, inky blacks.

A mundane restaurant is filled with the brown luster of mahogany trim; the lobby of a one-star hotel at least has a sumptuous green carpet; even at the Nighthawk Café, the two gleaming coffee urns show more vitality than all the human inhabitants combined.

Hopper can surprise a viewer in other ways. As confining as his apartment interiors look, he almost always provides a window with a glimpse of the vast world outside as an option. In *A Woman in the Sun*, the window he shows isn't the one that brightens the standing nude; rather it's another located beside her, one that reveals a knoll just brushed with an edge of that same sunrise. At other times, as in the highly peculiar *Excursion into Philosophy*, which shows a clothed, contrite man leaning away from an open book and his apparently just-sodomized female companion, the gentle field seen through the window on the extreme right goes largely unheeded.

For Hopper, society consisted entirely of windows: those on the inside look out, while we on the outside look in. For all their transparency, Hopper's windows both separate and liberate. A concrete wall creates a boundary that is imposed; the inhibitions of a sheet of glass, on the other hand, are more self-inflicted. We want to see the options we refuse to pursue; we like to know what lurks on the other side of the door we never open.

If all the inanimate specters who occupy Hopper's interiors appear incapable of opening that door, the problem might lie in the way they were painted. Hopper's humans are almost always stiff and unconvincing, the only generic element in a world of sharply observed specifics. His men seem to have tumbled out of a B movie, while his women look like something produced by Vargas with a hangover. It didn't help that he used his wife as the model for most of the female figures in his work; the same features keep cropping up like an outbreak of Down syndrome. The older he got, the more doll-like Hopper's people became (is that Ken and Barbie in *Sunlight in a Cafeteria?*). The lapse is odd, since his early sketches and watercolors show an artist with an innate feel for the dynamic possibilities of the human form. Just look at *L'Année Terrible: At the Barricades*, which shows a French fighter from behind just as he raises his rifle to shoot: it's an awkward pose gracefully rendered. The impressionistic style he dabbled with while studying in Europe enabled Hopper to catch moving figures with fleet

precision; painting figures who never move could only neutralize this skill. The best one can say of the people in Hopper's paintings is that they confirm the banality of their settings.

Because Hopper's theme of dislocation is so exhaustively explored, a student of his work can easily assume that the theme never changed. It did change, dramatically, in the fifties and sixties. Hopper was always a painter who relished sunlight; in his later work, light takes on a more pronounced role. It goes beyond simply brightening objects and heightening colors; it becomes a force, a presence, a deity. It lures Hopper's lost souls into their doorways and onto their porches; they drop their newspapers, look up from their books, abandon their desks. While showing no pleasure in the experience, everyone looks strangely transfixed, like horned toads on a hot rock. In *People in the Sun*, or *High Noon*, or *Sunlight on Brownstones*, or a dozen other works, light is more than a phenomenon perceived by the eyes; Hopper's people seem to be listening to it. The pictures resemble the old Christian Annunciation scenes minus the articulating angel, or they could be a depiction of an Islamic call to prayer. Light fills the empty lives of Hopper's humanity, and, for once, his figures seem receptive to its gift.

While light possesses the power to penetrate the elaborate grids the artist has constructed around his people, there is nothing beatific in the process; the recipients are illuminated, but they remain unenlightened. A lesser artist would have invested all this with some higher meaning, but Hopper maintains his detachment. He shows the sun a pagan reverence. The source of all life warms the living for a moment, holding them briefly before they go back to wasting their lives. Just how impersonally Hopper viewed this element can be seen in one of his last paintings, *Sun in an Empty Room*. The people and furniture that populate Hopper's interiors have vanished. Only the sun remains to subdivide the space with brilliant geometric shapes. Without the human clutter, the scene is strangely optimistic, an apocalypse of light. No other image shows how utterly unsentimental this most popular artist really was. He once said, "I think I'm not very human," and the cumulative effect of his oeuvre seems to confirm the indictment. He recognized no allegiance; he respected no authority. His membership in the human race was entirely accidental and unsolicited. One feels that if he ever witnessed a meteorite crashing into a city, he would have



made a mental note on how the flash of light bleached out the color of the buildings closest to the blast.

Hopper's very last painting was a double portrait of himself and his wife as two clowns taking a final bow. The curtain in the artist's theater has at last gone up, but the show is over. I've always found the picture uncharacteristically self-conscious and a little pat. Given the discomfort Hopper felt with the personal, it's not surprising that the formal self-portrait he painted forty years earlier isn't very successful either. He evinces a look of distracted study rather than introspection; this isn't the image of someone in the throes of discovery; rather this is how one studies the reflection of a pimple in a mirror. No, if I had to choose an image that summed up this artist, one of his least typical works would do, one of the lighthouses he painted throughout his career. They bear no relation to his established themes, but there is a definite affinity: a solitary presence standing at the furthest edge of land, scanning the dark void with a brilliant shaft of light. Was the light a warning, a search for survivors, or just a prurient glance? In a world in which we are all adrift, it could be all of the above.