

ESSAY

Gaylen Gerber

JOE SCANLAN, 1992

For the past decade Gaylen Gerber has committed himself to a seemingly narrow painting project that in fact is quite expansive and illuminating: making paintings of the same still life from the same viewpoint and all in the same three shades of gray, all on canvases of the same size.

Gerber's paintings generate a surprising range of variation and subtlety through this highly refined and disciplined system, and ultimately seem very heart-felt, optimistic, and human. Because his palette is so limited and his brushwork so restrained from any traditional painterly flourishes, viewers are required to stare at the paintings for several minutes, transfixed. Eventually one's eyes adjust to the paintings' tonal range, and the still life objects are revealed—and reveal themselves. Thus, a very intense process of visual concentration is slowly but amply rewarded.

This observation is rooted in the experience of seeing Gerber's paintings, More so than in the narrative of the objects they represent. A bowl, a glove, several lidded jars—all objects take on an eerie significance and indifference through Gerber's sheer and subtle repetition. As one's eye moves from one painting to the next these objects repeatedly coalesce and dissolve in the cognitive mind, making each new painting a reassessment of what viewers have already seen and know. This experience of visual memory and forgetfulness, this constant refutation and affirmation of what you are actually seeing exaggerates one's faith and confidence in the present. What one sees at any one moment is begin sensed, recorded, believed—all other information or judgments are subject to the misgivings of one's memory, the workings of one's mind.

If this sounds like an overly internalized, perceptual experience of art (one might even call it a *neurological* experience), it is described as such to emphasize the integral role and responsibility that viewers take in shaping the degree of content and meaning in Gerber's work. In his paintings this range of interpretation hinges on each person's reading of his simultaneously accurate and ambiguous still life objects.

Gerber's recent drawing, by extension, include a vast array of images gathered and traced from magazines, newspapers, cartoons and pornography, and suggest a veritable "image bank" of our social conscience. Due to their potentially infinite variety, these drawings rely even more than the paintings on each viewer's individual subconscious, as one must "start from scratch" in deciphering each new drawing—the information culled from each previous drawing having no specific bearing on the next. Consequently, each drawing initially induces a *tabula rasa* in the viewer's mind, a blank slate that viewers slowly simultaneously fill in with information from both the drawing and from within themselves. One sees what one wants to see, willed from the depths of the image and the self.