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Frank Mulvey, *Figure Works V*, Galerie Opus 2 Inc., Montréal, 7 to 21 June 1990

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## *Perceived Reality*



Frank Mulvey, *Self-Portrait Treachery*, 1990. Charcoal on paper, steel, plexiglass; 187 x 112 cm

**Frank Mulvey, *Figure Works V*,  
Galerie Opus 2 Inc., Montréal,  
7 to 21 June 1990 —**

**I**n the presentation of twenty-one works (five paintings, sixteen drawings) at his latest solo exhibition, Frank Mulvey offered to the public a retrospective look at some earlier and previously seen works, as well as insight into his newest creations. Mulvey's world is about Art and its importance in his life. His works reveal his very personal attachment to them through an extremely skillful handling and study of the limitations of the medium.

At first look the works may be termed *realistic*, but this only applies to the formalist approach as displayed in the accuracy of detailed representation and in the very *academic* rendering of

the human figure. The style and the themes behind the images are far from faithful to reality. Even though the human figure and the object in the foreground are always treated in a realistic manner, when the viewer mentally enters the world of the artist, he or she is constantly reminded that this is an imaginary, two-dimensional and graphic world where the view of the beholder is suggested, perhaps even dictated, by the creator. The relationship between the figure and object and their surroundings belong singularly to the pictorial field. The artist has created an image that invites the viewer to enter a new perceived reality and to take a new reading of its imagery.



48 Frank Mulvey, *Earth Man*, 1990. Charcoal on paper, steel, plexiglass; 116 x 118 cm

To accomplish this effect, Mulvey draws different planes of depth. This play with perspective is generated through the artist's complete grasp of the medium and in the suggestion of a real three-dimensional world within the two-dimensional reality of the work of art. In fact, Mulvey's style is a consequence of the artist's exploration into the formal characteristics of the Art of drawing, as well as into the limits of the medium to which the artist is most suited, namely charcoal on paper. The basis of this artist's style is drawing. Perceived as an act of creation and an art form in its own right, drawing for its practical qualities has remained the basis of almost all visual art media. The multi-textured surfaces suggested by the gestural treatment of the medium results in a sensorial immediacy with the works themselves. The beholder is invited to enter the world according to Frank Mulvey. It is a place where the recontextualization of nature into art occurs, giving a reviewed perception of our reality. Reconsideration of nature and reality leads to an exploration of the artist as creator; of the artist's relation to his creation (the work of art); and of the artist as the human figure (model).

The oil paintings and the drawings consistently remind the beholder of the overwhelming presence of nature. The subjects are united with the flattened space of the pictorial landscape, thus they become part of the realm of the

imagined nature. The ever-present theme of the artist and his creation is always closely related to nature. This is clearly seen in *Arrangement on Land* and *Under Yellow Skies* (1987) where Mulvey has represented himself at work, unlike the traditional image of "the artist in the studio". In both paintings, the figures are actively at work creating with their hands. The importance of gesture is stressed and paramount to the act of artistic creativity. The model is the artist at work. The theme is the creativity of the artist. Mulvey uses the self-portrait as a catalyst, echoing the artist in reality.<sup>1</sup> The painting *Figure on Rough Terrain* (1987) treats the same theme of the creativity of the artist in its contemplative rather than its active state. The artist portrays himself in a somnambulant state where pensive creativity of the mind occurs while the body is relaxed. The human figure and the landscape are united through a similar flattening treatment of the painted surface texture and forms. The artist concludes that Nature is an important source of inspiration for artistic creation. Mulvey displays his presence as the artist of the work itself directly through self-representation, or else passively and indirectly, as displayed in *Landscape Painting III* (1989). Behind the two protagonists who actively work with their hands hangs a painting that serves as a backdrop to this studio space. It represents a shadowed figure which recalls the portrait of the artist. The latter asserts his presence as a witness to the action within the painted scene as he peers through the medium of the paint, and he is, as well, creator and observer of the whole painted realm of the canvas. Mulvey continually reviews the interplay between the pictorial reality within the drawing and the actual reality of the work of art as it stands before.<sup>2</sup>

The recurrent themes of the artist, studio, model, and drawing as an act of creation as well as a work of art are treated in the expansive charcoal on paper triptych entitled *The Wraith's Eye* (1990). This personalized adaptation of the established subject of the artist and his model refers to the traditional grid drawing method for the accurate reproduction of the three-dimensional world. The beholder is given various views of the scene while a spectre-like onlooker hovers mysteriously about. The subject is not presented as we would perceive it, as if it were reality, but rather, various given views assert the presence of the pictorial reality of the work of art.<sup>3</sup> The backdrop, an imaginary realm of patterned space, only attests to the two-dimensional, fictitious world of art.



Mulvey has a repertory of images, such as the falling figure, the lovers series, the nude with or without drawn images on the body, as well as objects relating to the world and earth. In *Foreshadowed Fall* (1989), Mulvey's adaptation of the myth of Icarus's Fall from the skies, a figure is presented as falling to and from an undetermined space. A timeless quality is produced in the depiction of this chosen instant, which appears to be still within the pictorial reality. The shadow from the actual frame is cast upon the body that lies between airy heights and the surface of the drawing. We have a perceptual twist where the framed work both presents the fall to us and accompanies the figure on his descent. The artist persistently plays with the viewer's perception of reality, which results from the interplay between the two- and three dimensional states, between pictorial and actual reality.<sup>4</sup>

As can be gathered from the works already discussed, the human figure plays a predominant role in Mulvey's art. In his portraits of nudes, as in *Nude Couple*, *Charted Lands* (1988), *Dark Sun* (1989), as well as the lovers series, the human body has become the canvas of the painter, the paper of the draughtsman. The human figure itself is no longer subject or model, but rather has been identified and dictated by the artist to be a work of art — to be the object of creation. This theme is embodied in *Figure Drawing II* (1988) where the artist portrays himself using his own body as the support for his gestural and pictorial creativity.

The work that encompasses the essence of Mulvey's intent is his latest drawing, *Self-Portrait Treachery* (1990). A sketched figure in the background appears to pierce through a seemingly three-dimensional frame (identified as one of the artist's custom frames). In the tradition of Pygmalion, the portrait of the artist in the foreground reacts to the liveliness of his creation, yet the actual metal frame (placed between the framed plexiglas and the drawn surface) held before him holds the artist captured within the pictorial space of the overall drawing. Mulvey uses the self-portrait not as a mere representational tool, but as a device of perception. By placing his image within the drawing belonging to the pictorial reality, as well as by depicting his own resemblance, Mulvey places himself as subject matter, model, protagonist, witness, creative artist — the orchestrator of his fate within the pictorial world and of the world itself.

The predominance of nature and its association to the creativity of art is addressed in very recent drawings such as *Earth Man* and *Earthly Rapture* (1990). Here the artist adopts a new image for the world, namely the globe. The *Earth Man* cradles his head on the globe and his facial features are repeated within the shape of the continent of Africa. The closeness to nature is presented in the instinct of Man (used as a universal term) to be within a setting of over-abundant vegetation. As in none of his works, the protagonist, who previously dominated the environment, is part of nature, if not overwhelmed by it, consequently unifying man with nature. The patterning in the sky reflects the non-reality of the scene and indicates a state realm of dreams or ideas. Moreover, Mulvey metaphorically demonstrates the innate pantheism of Man. In *Earthly Rapture*, Man is portrayed in a profusion of instinctive actions and gestures that display his creativity in the arts (in this case music and dance). The protagonists dance to the music played on their imaginative and creative instruments. Two figures both hold a globe-like object and appear to press their ear to it as if to hear the heartbeat of creativity, the life in nature.

Mulvey's relationship to the themes in his works can best be illustrated by his statement: "In my work, the sensual and exploratory relationship between figure and environment metaphorically echoes my own tactile and creative involvement with illusion during the image making process". His works tell of universal themes of creativity within the arts — it is not only the painter, or the draughtsman, it is the artist at work, the act of creation.

**Roya Abouzia**

#### NOTES

1. These same ideas were pursued in another exhibited oil painting entitled *Red Pit* (1988).
2. Works created with similar intent are *Studio Flood* (1987) and *Third View* (1988).
3. This triptych is complemented by *Drawing Plexus* (1990) which offers yet another angle on the event.
4. Similar timelessness and play in perception with comparable imagery is seen in *Falling Figure* (1988).