

Plurality, Abundance, Profusion and Delight: talking up Paul Sloan (2008)

by Ken Bolton

Paul Sloan's work appears to me—though it appears differently, each time—as a kind of stirring of the Visual Imaginary of our moment. In it an extending repertoire of images, and of classes of imagery, is thrown up. This is seemingly done with a speed that precludes censorship or directed selection. Of course, one wonders how true this impression can be. But the results seem wonderfully free and uncensored by any governing anxiety of either the ravishing super-ego or of self-consciousness's demand for meaning, for justification.

The images are from nature, from urban living, but also from publishing and television and advertising, and they range over objects, vignettted 'scenes', over the generic, the logo, the branded, and also draw on the directly and very closely perceived. One of the beauties of the equivalence that this enforces is that things often experienced as generic—hardly experienced at all, because we are so familiar with them, or which are experienced with a brief shiver of distaste—are brought back to us revived and magically full of charm. Or they appear as no longer quite so recognisable, nor so immediately recognisable as (aesthetically) either friend or foe. In Sloan's work such imagery, de-natured by advertising's stylization and repetition, will appear amongst images more conventionally acceptable (as beautiful, interesting or whatever).

Of course that word "conventionally" begs some interrogation.

And this is the underlying point of Sloan's quick, considering eye and hand: in a world that is visually saturated the *convention* changes all the time. Paul Sloan's exhibitions surf the wave of this change in fashion—in the 'valency' or currency of certain images—and they work, variously, to accelerate, disrupt or query these waves and tides and eddies within the culture.

Formally Sloan's work has this same abundance and inclusiveness: the iconographic catholicism is matched by an equal heteronymy of style. One can conceive of Paul Sloan as a slacker reincarnation of Delacroix (the parrots, the turbans, the hawk on the wrist! the colour!) met with Ken Whisson (the same deliberately unmuscled line, the same bouts of energy and enervation, speed and slackness, the journey across unmarked white, the colour values sometimes close, sometimes contrasting). The sensibility is post-Pop, but timelessly contemporary: knowing and tired, fresh, avid and ironic, affectionate or noncommittal. The lineage of course includes Warhol, and maybe Larry Rivers and Joe Brainard, or Picabia and Morandi, Bruce Petty and Whitely and Robert Klippel. Sloan joins these and others, though he may not have been formally introduced to all. (Has he seen Brainard, Klippel, or, say, Kirchner? Would he even like them?)

His terrifically inclusive take on subject matter and style (styles of presentation that are often post-60s and advertising-derived—and, in the use of which, he varies greatly the angle taken, the cropping of image, and combines the cool and with-it of the present and immediately past with a dribbling, messy, unconcerned execution) has a liberating effect on all who view.

I don't want to bring Paul down with suggestions that he might be in any way dated. But it might be instructive to contrast his line with that of Olsen. There are similarities. They are akin in their energy. Olsen is mostly seen as celebratory, sometimes inflected towards sarcasm. Paul Sloan's work is more attitudinally mobile—if it is not ambivalent or even removed from judgement. The viewer finds sarcasm, delight, irony, cool sneering, frank interest, charm, or finds a curious affectlessness. But there is no overriding editorial. Importantly, in comparison to Olsen, Sloan's work is not cartographic in orientation, does not offer visual analogue for the land's rises and depressions, a tracking of coastlines or waterways as if from above. It is instead visually observing. Or it re-presents the already-observed and schematically familiar. And it deals, typically, with *items*, the already designed or registered, and much less with nature. Sloan's works are painted regularly in the vertical so that paint dribbles down the surface. A 'modernist' plane is thereby established—and a modernist element added to the mix—visually, an entertaining distraction, delaying or leading away from too quick a reading by the viewer. The pictures habitually resist resolution. Olsen's

energetic, joyous and spluttering line operated on a single plane, that of the map. Sloan's line ambiguously 'describes' scenes—and objects existing 'in-the-round' and in depth—as often as it treats of these things as signs, as flat and legible. Often both readings are available—or we graduate from one to the other.

The sum effect is nothing so simple as the inculcating of a new species of hedonism, more an amusement that gives both appetite and inoculation and which sensitises the eye to graphic energy and variety. One is grateful for the return of things we liked to love—the record player, the blossom, the early-teen buzz of fandom and obsession—for this adumbration of a typology of everyday evils and riches and distractions. And one is grateful for the return, in a contemporary guise, of drawing to the dispensation under which it used to live, as the artist's tool for examining every day life—from Rembrandt's toddler, Durer's hare, to Banksy's stencilled works in contemporary London.