

MICHAEL MAZUR

If the psychic history of the past twenty-five years can be said to have been dominated by the theme of confinement, and its corollary, sensory deprivation, then it follows that the successive 'movements' in the art of the period can be characterized by the manner and quality of their responses to that dominant theme. Thus, the Abstract Expressionists responded with rage—and a refusal to give form to their representations of the soul; whereupon, Pop art made an instinctive dive into the escape-hole of transcendent materialism; the minimalist and conceptualist ethos records its response by empathizing with the power of the theme itself, i.e., with alienation.

For what feels like the longest time, "serious" artists have done anything to avoid entering the human dimension: To be human has come to mean to be solitary. It is as if the very notion of humanity itself has become tainted with the perverse.

Michael Mazur has solved the problem engendered by this ubiquitous distrust by addressing his eye and his hand to the situation of the alienated ape. Mazur's "Ape Paintings," a series of oils done in the studio from sketches and color slides made at the Stoneham, Massachusetts Zoo, constitute a direct statement about the way we are now ordering our lives.

No longer do we live in times that are appropriate for the monkey to represent for us the spirit of befurred playfulness—sometimes purely sensual, often spiked with malice too—that it did in innumerable court paintings of 17th- and 18th-century Venice, Naples, Vienna, Paris, and Madrid; no longer is the nearly human figure of the monkey a recurrent cliché signifying feminine whim and wile in the Netherlandish still lifes of ripe and ripening tropical fruits. In Mazur's 1977 paintings, the monkey has become the archetypal late-20th-century victim; impotent and dispossessed, he is confined in a state of deprivation for the purpose of observation and interrogation. But zoos and laboratories notwithstanding, the monkey is psychically our sole direct link

with the animal world—he is our revolutionary Confessor, and to confine him is to hammer up the door to an unalterable aspect of our humanity.

Mazur's Ape Paintings comprehend this and more. Every canvas in the series is occupied by one or more monkeys in what has clearly become their normal, if not natural habitat: bark-free tree stumps and truncated branches have been set down in man-made environments that are travesties of Eden; the aspects of one monkey pair recall Masaccio's Adam and Eve, except that for the monkeys there is no exit—they are terminal cases.

The cages at Stoneham do not have bars. What keeps the spectators apart from the apes is transparent glass. The transformation of the monkey as man's animal nature into the monkey as man's experimental victim is complete but for one element. It is our recognition of the light source and its significance in these paintings that adds the final, ironic touch: the light in every one of these paintings is located vertically above the

monkeys. This is not to be interpreted as an approximation of the sunlight that first broke through the primeval forest to illuminate humanity's potential. Mazur uses top lighting not to indicate a way through which the monkeys might free themselves from confinement, nor to suggest another dimension to their existence. As an agent of transfiguration, light is out of the question, and out of the picture. It is, on the contrary, used to flatten and diminish and compel into regression those within its spread. It is the light manipulated by the interrogator, a mockery of illumination.

One distinguished viewer of Mazur's Ape Paintings has remarked on the resemblance of the red and green backgrounds (the walls of the cells) to the paintings of Clyfford Still. The resemblance is there, to be sure, but in truth Mazur was only rendering what he learned at Stoneham: that the monkeys had earlier scratched away at the green to reveal the red underpainting. But the monkeys Mazur shows us have long since quit occupying their hands this way.

They have quit because they have been claimed by their backgrounds. Their link with humanity has been snapped, throughout the period of their confinement and manipulation.

That is Mazur's vision, and the fact that he has succeeded in communicating it so precisely, and without even a tremor of ambiguity, gives it a resonance that carries it beyond the bounds of what might otherwise have been a bleak sentimentality. If we had been examining the work of, say, Goya, it would be unnecessary to inquire into the reasons for the artist's success. But in a period when attitudes have become polarized between two-dimensional analysis at one extreme, and regressive empathy at the other, it is good to see the work of an assured figure painter reminding us that the vitality of an artist's concerns and his existence independent of them continue to maintain a position at the very crux of all artistic development. (Robert Miller, *January 7-28*)

Michael Florescu



Michael Mazur, *Cage at Stoneham, #21, 1977*. Oil on canvas, 58 x 90". Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.