

Horacio Torres died in 1976, when he was still in his fifties. He was one of the finest figurative painters of our time—finer, I think, than more widely known artists such as Balthus or Andrew Wyeth. His untimely death is all the more of a loss to art because, as one critic pointed out, Torres was getting better in his last years. Torres' paintings deserve their praise, but it's not the quality of his art that should be focused on; what is of concern is how his quality gets interpreted. A number of critics and reviewers have shown an appreciation for his art. Kenworth Moffett, in particular, has discussed Torres' paintings with insight. What bothers me is how other people, less acquainted with the limits imposed by aesthetic experience on the vocabulary of criticism, might interpret the reasons that have been given for Torres' excellence.

Reviewers have said two basic things about Torres' paintings: he uses an Old Master style of paint application (free, brushy paint strokes) and he crops his figures. These critics have said in essence that the formal character of his art makes Torres look modern (i.e., the emphasis on drapery, the cropping, and the composition), and his handling of paint (in terms of the figure) makes him look old-fashioned. I don't disagree with these descriptions, but don't think this is the best way to sum up Torres' art because of the way in which an emphasis on the formal qualities of his work might (and does) get misunderstood.

Torres didn't put down paint for the sake of putting down paint, nor did he worry about getting the composition right simply because he wanted to create a balanced picture. Like a lot of other contemporary figurative painting, Torres' art includes some obvious modern trademarks, all of which have been noted before: the cropping, lots of empty background space, and a loose application of paint.

But Torres kept these devices subordinate to a sensual vision of the human body. What inspired him as an artist was the female nude. He painted in order to bring the fleshiness of the female body into relief. As a painter, he excelled at creating "high-



HORACIO TORRES

Horacio Torres, *Reclining Nude*, 1975. Oil on canvas, 52 x 62". Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

lights," and he knew the pictorial value of these highlights; they made you feel the skin of the body.

Some people might think that this would be an inevitable practice among contemporary figurative artists, but it's not. For some reason, most realists can't transform their handling of paint into a sensual language; they flatten not only the form that they represent, but they flatten out their own handling of paint. They can't seem to dig into the contours of the human body in terms of gesture, so inured have they become to the method of just juxtaposing patches of pigment. Torres had no such inhibitions.

His feeling for the sensuousness of human flesh, expressed in terms of paint, is what makes Torres such an exception among his contemporaries. He is exceptional, yet the way he paints is the most natural way that anyone

can paint.

He searches and explores what he wants to see. If he handles contour superbly (which he does, as in *Reclining Nude* of 1975 where the lines of the torso and legs flow fast and easy), then it's because the proportions of the body that he wants to portray are neither complacent nor lax nor cursory. The proportions of this nude female are broad, yet feel long. Her joints are emphasized with firmness and subtlety. Like a true sensualist, Torres knows how to linger over the joints without getting trapped in paint. You can also see that her head is cut off by the frame, not only for academic reasons, but to bring the element of portraiture under control. One of the problems in figure painting is how to portray the figure in its entirety as a human body, without either depersonalizing the subject or letting the portrait get the up-

per hand. In this painting, Torres has beautifully overcome the problem.

Most artists who created major figurative art had a large feeling for form. By "form" I mean the shape and structure of something as distinguished from the material of which it is composed. This was the case with Cézanne as well as Titian. So far this has proven to be one of the essential factors in good figurative art. You can see what happens with "realists" like Philip Pearlstein, Gregory Gillespie, William Beckman, Jack Beal, and Alfred Leslie who don't have this feeling. They see so much detail on the surface of the body that their interior modeling never coalesces with the broader outlines of their forms. So they end up turning Ingres into Grant Wood. In comparison to Torres' paintings, their work is stiff and wooden. (Tibor de Nagy, March 7-April 2)

Valentin Tatransky