

Robin Lowe

ROAD TO EREHWON

REFLEX
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Preface

Robin Lowe's Erehwon

The Suspension of Disarray

The American childhood, it is often remarked, extends well into middle age., but few have been willing to contemplate the possibility of the reverse. More than a decade ago, Robin Lowe began using as models some very young children he knew. From the start, he painted with an eye to invention. The portraits did not resemble his subjects entirely, but instead took on attributes of his own imagining. Lowe continued to develop this approach over the years, and as the real children grew, so did his half-imaginary children. A



double set of references -- real to fantasy, younger to older -- is probably enough to constitute a world, and Lowe's hybrid subjects accordingly came to inhabit a specific, half-imaginary place, which he dubbed Erehwon, after Samuel Butler's 19th-century satire, Erehwon. At first glance, Erehwon could be mistaken for any number of regions in the Northeastern United States. There are fields and woods and winding roads, teetering houses, low-rent pools and solitary gas pumps. There is a loneliness quite alien to the spectacular landscapes of, say, the American west. Devoid of the sublime, the land bears the stamp of the small farm and the dairy barn, the stamp of

desperate descendants and their slow eradication from the scene. It is into this vacuum, a real enough phenomenon in the rural areas of Pennsylvania and New York State, that Lowe's art has moved and flourished. Conspicuously absent from Erehwon is any sense of family life, even of the subsistence variety. The children appear to be very much on their own, as if survivors of a war, or an inexplicable mass abandonment. A swimming pool has been filled with water somehow, but the idea of functional plumbing in Erehwon is dubious, to say the least. -- School books, ice cream trucks,



paper boats -- all missing. Every image has been drained of any hope of generosity. Or rather, drained of the signs that might reassure viewers of their own generous impulses. We are not in the grips of a Koons or a Ruscha, whose works, for all their distance on the American dream, consistently acknowledge its allure. In Erehwon, we get Huck Finn without a river to provide lyrical uplift. Indeed, against such a vacant backdrop, the figures amount to grotesques of self-sufficiency. Having no adults to watch over them, they seem to have grown adult heads

of their own. Yet Lowe is also careful to raise doubts as to who is creating this ominous world. It is quite difficult to imagine where the boy in american standard could have obtained his rifle, or who might possibly become its target. Stripped of context, the weapon becomes an article of make-believe, a talisman offered up to the viewer -- whether consciously or not, none can say. In several scenes, a garden gnome has sprung to life, an act of magic that transmits more dread than it does wonder. But for whom is the dwarf alive? For the children? Or it is only we who can see the quick of its eyes, from our vantage point on the rational side of the nowhere mirror? In place of a coherent fantasy that might



leaven his art with forgiveness or humor, Lowe presents a discontinuous nightmare in which the responsibility for its fruits is always shifting. Lowe's painterly techniques bear the brand of this discontinuity as well. Benoit Mandelbrot, the pioneer of fractal geometry, has said that the repetition of visual elements provokes fear, and the insight is amply proven in Erehwon. In Jack Russell, we encounter a dog of the sort that would normally pass for Rockwellian sentimentality. Another contemporary artist, given this subject, might have introduced a trope of pop irony as a comment on saccharine values. Lowe does some-

thing far more unsettling: he allows the trees in the background to lapse into child-like self-similarity. This naive technique is all the more unnerving for being selectively employed. The dog belongs to a realistic universe, its environment to another. It is clear that this is wrong, though it is equally clear that the gambit is not to fool the eye with optical illusions. What is called into question, rather, is the age of the viewer. Like the inhabitants of Erehwon, we are not permitted the sympathies of a single mind, but must navigate the slippage from youth to maturity and back again, without the benefit of a normal -- which is to say a biologically continuous -- development. In content and form alike, Lowe invites the viewer into a land-



scape that is, one could say, marked by permanent instability. Yet this instability never descends into utter chaos. On the contrary, in Erehwon everything is held in suspense. The gun, though touted, remains unfired. The old farmhouse has not yet come crashing down, and never will. Whether the cornstalks are scheduled for planting or uprooting is pointedly unclear, but in any event, we are not led to expect anything so dynamic as harvest or wholesale destruction. Even the time of day seems to be frozen at some eternal declination of the sun -- or moon. The imminent terrible event, having been stated beyond a doubt, simply cannot be located. The ability to sustain a unified mood over the course of years speaks to a

high degree of control, and perhaps, in this case, to a deliberate strategy for survival as well. In suspending the final collapse, Lowe has created a world that can be entered and left without serious disruption, and thus without egregious loss of moral memory. Both evil and play can still be retrieved, to be arranged anew, and perhaps even reconciled. It may be objected that this process is drastically at odds with the wider American consciousness, which preoccupies itself so readily with explosions and happy endings.



But then, that may be exactly what makes Erehwon relevant to any particular era. In real life, where we all play a part in the general destruction even as we pin our hopes on heaven, one can do much

Introduction having a place to bury one's dread. Erehwon, is not only a right of grief. It is also the fate of a secret treasure.

Text by David Lindsay

Caverns of the Psyche

For his solo exhibition, Road to Erehwon, at Reflex Gallery in Amsterdam, Robin Lowe selected specific works completed between 1997 and 2002. Paintings, drawings, and etchings were chosen to illustrate

the potency of memory and the subconscious, moments frozen in time. Although quite a private person, Lowe is not reticent about interaction.

To the contrary, his work triggers and betrays a profound sense of collective responsibility in a sociopolitical context. For Robin, his art is an integral part of who he is. A dream diary retracing time. Via the human psyche, he simultaneously travels through the present, and future. Eloquent and evocative, Lowe masters and transcends the conventions of his chosen mediums: painting, drawing, and etchings. He meticulously, yet intuitively shapes his visions in an eternal, timeless space, and once confronted by it, one can't possibly escape its pull.

Closely examining his adroitly drawn portraits in realistic spaces and rich saturated colors reveals Lowe's practical



ability and technical talent. He wades through figurative styles and painting schools with an ever-present emotive filter. Still, he offers an offhand naiveté with his vibrant psychedelic woodcut patterns and one-dimensional cartoon touches, like placing a repetitive deer print on a little girl's overalls. His moody intensities of light and dark shades, casting a spell over the faces and thin, sinewy bodies do recall the Renaissance masters.

Road to Erehwon (1999 and 2000, oil on linen): Your first encounter with A Road to Erehwon leaves you with a potent and vibrant impression of alienation. It is the sensation one gets after

driving highways for long hauls with little or no sleep.

Tunnel vision that force focuses on the caverns of the psyche. The works can never be mistaken for the vast landscape paintings of the American West. His works resonate with American middle class subtext, and meticulously

flaunt his dark impressions with an expansive panorama. It is an emotionally charged landscape that arises

from hidden corners of the human psyche of lost moments and long forgotten memories. The positioning of the three roads to Erehwon within one

frame is sublime. As such, it forces one to reflect on a new aesthetic harmony. At the outset, the images challenge notions of classical composition in order to reflect

beyond common perception and then they insist upon rediscovering complexity and fluidity of thought.







— 'Soldier's Pay'





— *'Providence'*











— 'Rowan Oak'



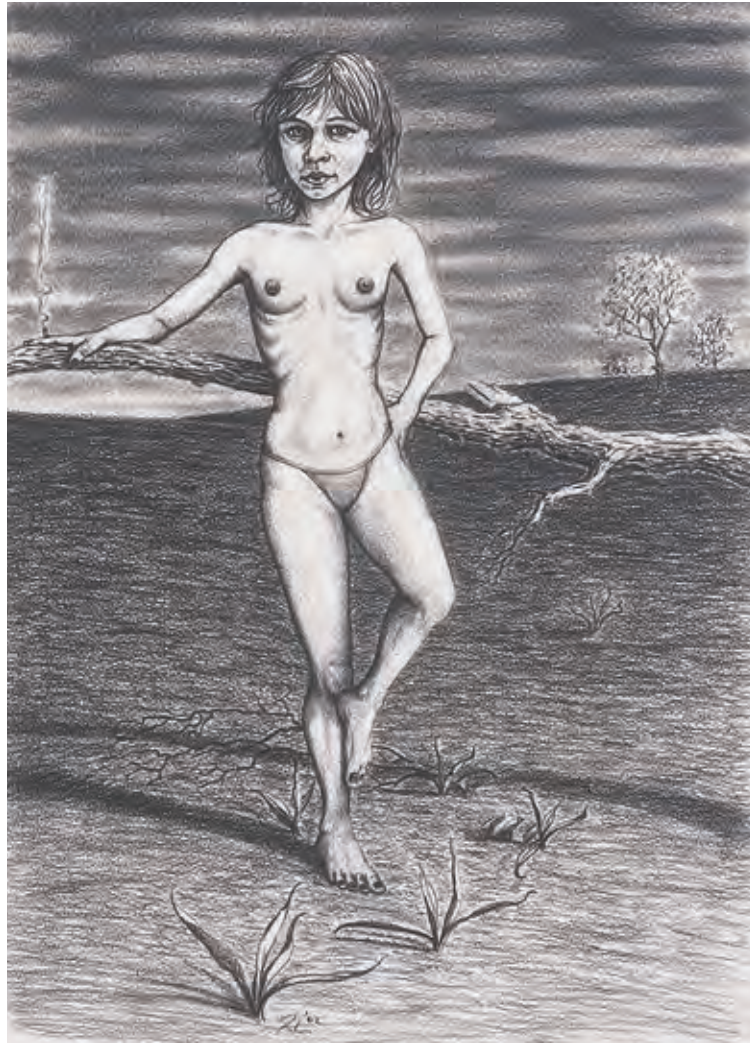




— *'Sound and Fury'*









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