

ABSTRACT

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THE “RETURN TO ORDER” IN GEORGE
AULT’S LATE PAINTINGS

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This thesis examines the paintings of American artist George Ault from the late 1930s until his death in 1948. Questioning earlier appraisals of these images as surrealist, it argues that they are better aligned with the tenets of the Italian metaphysical school and its founding artist, Giorgio de Chirico. Unlike the surrealists, de Chirico espoused a nationalist point of view in his paintings, a tendency that is replicated in Ault’s late works. The thesis considers two groups of images: the first is Ault’s paintings of the female nude, which repeat the classical allusions found in the paintings of de Chirico. The second is images of Woodstock, New York, in which Ault applies the methodology of the metaphysical school to American subjects, creating nostalgic, imagined views of nineteenth-century rural New York. The conclusion considers how Ault’s late paintings complicate scholarly narratives of surrealism’s reception in American art before World War II.

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GEORGE AULT’S LATE PAINTINGS

By

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Advisory Committee:
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Introduction

At the time of his death in 1948, the American painter George Ault had reached the end of a slow and steady decline into professional obscurity and financial ruin. Twenty years earlier, he had been one of the most promising and critically-acclaimed artists in New York City, exhibiting his work as part of a rarified group of vanguard American modernists in venues such as Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery and the Whitney Studio Club.¹ But a series of high-profile disputes with his fellow artists and promoters led to his withdrawal from the New York art scene, and he spent the last eleven years of his life living in self-imposed isolation in the small town of Woodstock in upstate New York.² Upon his death, Ault was honored with a memorial exhibition at the well-known Milch Galleries in New York City, but the years that he spent away from the mainstream art community caused irreparable damage to his legacy.³ Today, his name has become little more than a footnote in the history of American art before World War II, and his work has not received nearly the same attention that has been given to other artists working in a similar precisionist style, such as Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth.

Part of the critical oversight that has characterized Ault's legacy is undoubtedly due to the artist's own reclusiveness and his absence from New York City during important moments in the history of modern American art. But this lack of scholarly interest probably has as much to do with the difficulty of discussing

¹ "George Ault – Exhibitions," unpublished manuscript, n.d., in George Ault Papers, Archives of American Art.

² Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock: George Ault, the Independent Years* (Pittsburgh: Dorrance Publishing Co., Inc., 1978), 52.

³ "George Ault – Exhibitions."

Ault's work as it does with any historical circumstances that affected his critical statue. In its sustained and deep engagement with avant-garde European artistic trends—particularly the metaphysical painting of Giorgio de Chirico—Ault's work stands as an anomaly within the history of American modernism that is difficult to accurately categorize and explain. In this study of Ault's late paintings made in Woodstock, I will look to the American artist's rapprochement with de Chirico and the metaphysical school as a means towards understanding his oeuvre as a distinctly political gesture, one that was rooted in the discourse of national identity. Just as de Chirico articulated a version of modernist painting that was suffused in the notion of a classicized "Italianness," Ault's work advocates for a rich tradition of American art-making of which he considered himself a forerunner. His final paintings look to classical Europe and nineteenth-century America as sources of artistic validation, using the characteristically metaphysical trope of dream imagery to reconstruct the vanished landscapes of these two historical worlds. The physical traces of these civilizations that Ault could not see directly were simply conjured from his imagination, resulting in an idealized, wistful vision of American (art) history that invokes de Chirico's enigmatic and chimerical style.

While Ault is perhaps best-known today for his suggestive and inscrutable late paintings that gesture strongly to de Chirico, his earlier works are much more straightforward and adhere closely to the typical style of American precisionism. In his paintings from the 1920s to the mid-1930s, Ault focused primarily on the industrial and urban scenes that were popular with his contemporaries, his images rendered using the crisp, clear lines and interlocking geometries of solid colors that

came to define the precisionist movement. Upon his move to Woodstock in 1937, however, Ault's work began to follow more unusual paths. While he continued to make paintings of the now-distant city, the skyscrapers in these new works were likely to be juxtaposed with disparate images of nude figures and fragments of classical sculptures. Ault's interests during this period also settled on his immediate environs in the secluded town of Woodstock, and it was to this subject that he dedicated the majority of his late works. The paintings of Woodstock from the 1940s reveal Ault's fascination with vernacular rural architecture and pristine natural environments, depicted with the same formal clarity that had defined his earlier oeuvre. But while these images represent a continuity in terms of technique and style, they are also suffused with an aura of strange disquiet that is particular and unprecedented in his oeuvre. Ault acknowledged that many of these scenes were at least partly invented, rather than executed exclusively from life. A traditional Woodstock home might now appear within a completely imagined landscape, or a figure recalled from Ault's memories would surface in an otherwise fastidious depiction of the forest around the artist's home. With their emphasis on pure invention and their conjurations of intense visual moods, these paintings mark a significant departure not only from Ault's previous work, but also from the larger precisionist movement in which he is usually grouped.

Those few scholars and critics who have analyzed Ault's career have usually described his late paintings as exercises in surrealism (albeit a heavily-distilled version), their affinities with the European art movement being reflected in their preoccupation with dream imagery and inexplicable visual disjunctions. In her 1988

catalogue essay for an Ault retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American art, one of only three major exhibitions of Ault's work since his death, Susan Lubowsky highlighted the artist's indebtedness to surrealist modes, writing that his experimentation with the style allowed him to "emphasize the irrational character of the mundane." But her investigation did little to explain the motivations behind this surrealist turn or elaborate on the significance of Ault's chosen themes. Lubowsky ultimately arrived at the rather resigned conclusion that "[a]s in most Surrealist work, [Ault's] symbolism remains enigmatic."⁴ Similarly, a 1950 review of Ault's memorial exhibition by Howard DeVree in the *New York Times* described the artist's paintings as "realism...with Surrealist overtones," but offered no hypothesis as to why Ault would choose to merge these styles or what their synthesis might be attempting to communicate.⁵ Thus, Ault's engagement with surrealism has only been recognized at its most basic level, leaving the issue of intention and meaning unresolved.

The problem of understanding the surrealist element in Ault's work also stems from another critical and scholarly lacuna, this one surrounding the role that surrealism played in American art before World War II. Standard art historical narratives of this period point to the Abstract Expressionists' fascination with the unconscious mind as surrealism's primary influence on American art, a source of inspiration that led to the midcentury movement's spontaneous and gestural style of painting. Yet a number of American artists working in the 1930s and 40s embraced surrealism in a much more literal way, adopting the fantastical but still largely

⁴ Susan T. Lubowsky, *George Ault* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1988), 31.

⁵ Howard DeVree, review of Ault's memorial exhibition at the Milch Galleries, *New York Times*, February 5, 1950.

figurative style of European painters such as Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst. Prominent prewar American artists with surrealist tendencies such as Walter Quirt, O. Louis Guglielmi, and James Guy have sometimes been grouped together under the heading of “social surrealism,” a descriptor that highlights these artists’ efforts to combine the surrealist interest in subjective experience and bizarre visuals with a concern for real-world political and social issues.⁶ By transforming scenes of everyday life into macabre fantasies, the social surrealists called attention to the absurdity and horror of problems such as worker exploitation and discriminatory treatment of immigrants and the working class.⁷ And yet this overtly political version of American surrealism also seems ill-fitted to describe Ault’s work, since his paintings are frequently devoid of human life or depict scenes that are far-removed from the social struggles of contemporary American society. His canvases therefore stand at a curious nexus between the hard-edged, calculated precisionist style and a deeply personal surrealist vision, one that appears out of sync even with those other Americans who chose to invoke surrealism in their art.

Despite the relative neglect his name has suffered since his death, Ault’s work recently returned to the public eye with the 2011 exhibition *To Make a World: George Ault and 1940s America* at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Curated by art historian Alexander Nemerov, the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue

⁶ For more information on American Social Surrealism, see Ilene Susan Fort, “American Social Surrealism,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 22, no. 3 (1982): 8-20. Fort characterizes American Social Surrealism as “an American borrowing of European surrealist techniques applied to social commentary and criticism” that is not “theoretically pure,” since it largely avoids the focus on psychic automatism and abstraction that characterized the original European movement (8).

⁷ A characteristic example of Social Surrealism’s political critique can be seen in Guglielmi’s oil painting *Phoenix* (1935), which depicts “the birth of a communist society [represented by a portrait of Vladimir Lenin] out of the debris of capitalism,” symbolized by a barren landscape that recalls the work of European surrealists such as Dalí (Fort, 14).

described Ault's late paintings of Woodstock (particularly a series of four paintings of an intersection near his home called Russell's Corners) as attempts to make sense of the tumultuous contemporary world, specifically the atrocities and destruction of World War II. Nemerov wrote that "Ault's precise alignments and geometries of barns, telephone wires, and streetlights symbolically calm disastrous and unpredictable events," imposing a visual order on a situation that Ault otherwise found distressing and unfathomable.⁸ To reinforce this interpretation, the exhibition featured a number of ostensibly-unrelated paintings by American artists working during the 1940s that Nemerov saw as having a similar investment in the emotional turbulence surrounding the war. Furthermore, Nemerov characterized Ault's late paintings as having a distinctly "emotional" quality that results from their haunting depictions of unpopulated spaces, as well as from the artist's complete self-identification with the scenes he chose to paint.⁹ It is this sense of emotional attachment to his work (an attachment that Ault himself acknowledged) that Nemerov identifies as the distinguishing feature of Ault's particular brand of precisionism, an approach that stands in stark contrast to the cool detachment practiced by artists like Sheeler.¹⁰ Ault's paintings of Woodstock therefore "make a world" of private meaning into which the artist could project his own uncertainties and fears and attempt to bring them under control.

Nemerov's analysis makes important and relevant observations about Ault's work and its ideological departures from "mainline" precisionism, for the artist's

⁸ Alexander Nemerov, *To Make A World: George Ault and 1940s America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2011), 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

paintings from the 1940s are certainly invested in a sense of emotion and subjectivity that was of little interest to figures like Sheeler. But Nemerov's expository essay completely skirts the issue of surrealism in Ault's work, often choosing to focus on somewhat ill-defined concepts such as the presence of "compassion" in the images of Russell's Corners.¹¹ The omission of surrealism is significant, since the frequent presence of surrealist devices in the later paintings would seem to pose a problem for Nemerov's interpretation of Ault's oeuvre as one that seeks to order and subjugate chaos. Few other movements in the history of modern art were more interested in deliberate confusion and disorder for its own sake than surrealism, making Ault's attachment to the movement appear curious when seen from the perspective that Nemerov espouses. If Ault's purpose was to create a world of stability and intelligibility, why do so many of his paintings combine the real and the imagined in such a mystifying and impenetrable way? Nemerov's essay makes significant headway in understanding Ault's late work, but a number of questions remain unanswered, particularly regarding the artist's reliance on divergent stylistic methods.

The present study takes the Smithsonian exhibition as its point of departure, seeking to interrogate in a more sustained manner the quality of interiority that Nemerov rightly identifies as fundamental to Ault's Woodstock paintings. In formulating a new interpretive "code" for the 1940s images, this thesis looks to Ault's engagement with the "surreal" as a source not only of personal signification, but of a deeper project related to issues of national artistic character. This line of inquiry began with the discovery of Ault's admiration for the work of Giorgio de Chirico, an Italian painter, writer, and, most importantly, *progenitor* of the surrealist movement

¹¹ Ibid., 87.

in Europe during the 1910s. Ault's widow Louise wrote in a 1978 biography of the artist that he "[felt] within himself a kinship with de Chirico" that made him "a different man, with a new vision" beginning in the 1930s.¹² Ault's fascination with de Chirico has long been held up as evidence of his surrealist turn (even Louise frames his interest in this way), but what is forgotten in drawing this conclusion is that de Chirico was not a full-fledged member of the surrealist movement. Rather, he served as one of the founding members of the *scuola metafisica* (metaphysical school) of painting and literature, along with his brother Alberto Savinio and the Italian painter Carlo Carrà. Although de Chirico and the other members of the metaphysical school were frequently in contact with surrealist artists working in Paris, resulting in a number of formal and thematic similarities between the two movements, there remain important differences between them that render the two styles distinct and even somewhat incompatible.¹³ I see these discrepancies as key to elaborating on the specific vision of the world that Ault presents in his late paintings. For when these works are considered within the ideological context of metaphysical painting, they appear to have very little to do with surrealism as it is traditionally defined.

Central to this analysis of Ault's relationship with de Chirico is the definition of the metaphysical school (and metaphysical painting more specifically) proposed by comparative literature scholar Keala Jewell in her 2004 book *The de Chirico Brothers and the Politics of Modernism*. In her discussion of de Chirico's work and its political leanings, Jewell characterizes the metaphysical school as having a strong

¹² Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, 74-5.

¹³ Joshua C. Taylor, "Introduction: Scuola Metafisica," in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 445-6.

interest in reinterpreting earlier works of art and drawing on a historical artistic heritage.¹⁴ More specifically, the metaphysical school maintained a deep engagement with the Italian artistic tradition, a tendency that is especially visible in de Chirico's paintings. Filled with classical sculptures, fragments of Roman and Renaissance architecture, and expansive, shadow-filled piazzas, de Chirico's images make constant and explicit reference to Italy's storied history of art-making. But his paintings also contain numerous allusions to modernity and industrialization, the relics of the past being juxtaposed with trains, machinery, and factory chimneys that billow smoke into the sky.

The complicated amalgam of periods and styles in de Chirico's work is a reflection of his interest in what Jewell refers to as "Italianness" or "Italianicity" (*Italianità*). For metaphysical artists, Italy was defined by the heterogeneity of its culture, which possessed numerous eras of rich artistic material on which to draw.¹⁵ De Chirico acknowledged the importance of making reference to this multiplicitous Italian tradition in his 1919 manifesto "On Metaphysical Art," writing that "[a] European era like ours, which carries with it the enormous weight of infinite civilizations and the maturity of so many spiritual and fateful periods, produces an art that in certain aspects resembles that of the restlessness of myth. Such an art arises through the efforts of the few men endowed with particular clear-sightedness and sensibility. Naturally such a return brings with it signs of the various antecedent epochs, hence the birth of an art that is enormously complicated and polymorphous. Therefore, the new art is not a fashion of the moment." He goes on to opine that "the

¹⁴ Keala Jewell, *The de Chirico Brothers and the Politics of Modernism* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

initial conscious manifestation of the metaphysical movement should have been born in Italy. In France, this could not have happened.”¹⁶ For de Chirico, the practice of making visionary, metaphysical art required a serious engagement with the particular history of Italian civilization. It is this exploration of Italian heritage that marks the political character of the metaphysical school’s approach, revealing it to be a distinctly nationalistic undertaking. Those Italian artists who possessed sufficient “clear-sightedness” could recognize that which was “spiritual and fateful” in the eras of the past, a complicated process of discovery that hinged on the idea of hidden meaning contained within historical relics as well as the modern physical environment.

The often-paradoxical results of de Chirico’s historical combinations created what French artist Marcel Duchamp referred to as a “metaphysical world” within the Italian artist’s work, a visual space that is defined by a fascination with enigma, multiplicity, and veiled significance.¹⁷ This interest in the deeper meaning of objects and spaces was the source of the movement’s “metaphysical” designation. De Chirico elaborated on “the metaphysical aspect of things” by observing that “every object has two aspects: one current one which we see nearly always and which is seen by men in general, and the other which is spectral and metaphysical and seen only by rare individuals in moments of clairvoyance and metaphysical abstraction.”¹⁸ The role of the metaphysical artist was to provide a frame in which an object’s “spectral”

¹⁶ Giorgio de Chirico, “On Metaphysical Art,” originally published in *Valori Plastici* (Rome, April-May 1919), trans. Caroline Tisdall and reprinted in Massimo Carrà, *Metaphysical Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 88.

¹⁷ Marcel Duchamp, “Giorgio de Chirico: Painter, Writer, Illustrator,” *Collection of the Société Anonyme* (1943), reprinted in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 1989), 146.

¹⁸ De Chirico, “On Metaphysical Art,” 89

value—usually defined as a quality of peculiarity and abnormality—could be revealed, most often through the use of visual non sequiturs and inexplicable groupings of figures and forms. “Art is the fatal net that catches these strange moments [of discovering the metaphysical] in flight,” he wrote, adding that these instances of recognition were “all the more fruitful when made manifest in an individual gifted with creative talent and clairvoyance.”¹⁹ The disorienting canvases of de Chirico and his metaphysical compatriots were intended to give the less-enlightened viewer a glimpse of these revelatory encounters, in which the world was exposed for its fundamental incomprehensibility.

The metaphysical school’s fixation on meaning was not purely theoretical, however, but remained intimately tied to its nationalist project. De Chirico wrote that his paintings sought to “perceive...the character of a people... the invisible tie that joins a people to its creations.” Using the dormer windows of Parisian architecture as an example, he opined that “there is an unknown force which has driven the architects to make these dormers, to feel them. I see a link between the dormer window and the red trousers of the French soldier... and a thousand other things which I cannot explain, and this is true for all peoples, all periods, all countries.”²⁰ This citation demonstrates that De Chirico’s engagement with Italian artistic source material was not just patriotic boosterism, but an attempt to elucidate and uncover the indescribable forces that give rise to the cultural creations of his homeland. As noted earlier, de Chirico felt that Italian artists were best suited to this task of exploration;

¹⁹ Ibid., 87.

²⁰ Giorgio de Chirico, “Manuscript from the Collection of Paul Eluard,” in *Hebdomeros: With Monsieur Dudron’s Adventure and Other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. John Ashbery (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1992), 185-6.

the French, for example, lacked the “prophetic spirit” necessary for the creation of such a probing and analytical art.²¹ All nations may have possessed a particular spirit that guided their material production, but it was de Chirico and his contemporaries in Italy that would be the first to picture these unknowable cultural forces in the visual arts.²²

In their fascination with enigma and the secret significance of the everyday, the artists of the metaphysical school were deeply indebted to the writings of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. De Chirico explained that all of his earliest metaphysical works from the period of 1912-15 “owe[d] a great deal to Friedrich Nietzsche, whom I read passionately at the time.”²³ De Chirico was particularly inspired by Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* and its descriptions of the Italian city of Turin. In this book, Nietzsche paints Turin as a melancholic place haunted by its past and perpetually cast in dramatic, autumnal light, a vision that resurfaces in the long shadows and deserted squares of De Chirico’s early metaphysical paintings. Fundamental to Nietzsche’s description of Turin was the notion of a true reality hidden by human perception. Turin’s “strangeness”—the disquieting atmosphere created by its art and architecture and their intimations of a distant, fragmented history—is an example of the fundamentally illusory nature of reality, for it is only when one can recognize such strangeness in the everyday world that the artifices and

²¹ De Chirico, “On Metaphysical Art,” 88.

²² It is this correlation between the philosophy of enigma and cultural politics that stands as Keala Jewell’s major contribution to the scholarship on de Chirico and his art. For more information, see Jewell, 62-4.

²³ Giorgio de Chirico, “Some Perspectives on My Art” (1935), in *Hebdomeros*, trans. Margaret Crosland (London: Peter Owen, 1964), 252.

delusions of perception are stripped away.²⁴ It was in Turin that Nietzsche saw true reality as something that is innately perplexing and inexplicable, an idea to which de Chirico responded enthusiastically.²⁵

De Chirico described having his own enigmatic experience in Turin while gazing at a statue of Dante in a public square. Suddenly, the sculpture and its surroundings that had once seemed so familiar appeared as though he were “looking at these things for the first time,” an experience that he described as “inexplicable.”²⁶ Furthermore, de Chirico wrote that his readings of Nietzsche had made him aware of “a host of strange, unknown, solitary things which can be translated into painting,” including “the epochs of history...the revolutions in thought throughout the ages, [and] modern times.” “One must picture everything in the world as an enigma,” he continued, “not only the great questions one has always asked oneself... [but also] the enigma of things generally considered insignificant...[t]o live in the world as if in an immense museum of strangeness.”²⁷ De Chirico’s interest in enigma was therefore an effort to reveal the patently incomprehensible nature of history and modernity as Nietzsche had done several decades earlier, a process that the Italian artist enacted through his extraordinary and opaque compositions.

²⁴ This idea of a hidden reality and its implications for art and aesthetics has its origins in Nietzsche’s first major text, *The Birth of Tragedy*. He writes: “Philosophical men even have a presentiment that reality in which we live and have our being is also mere appearance, and that another, quite different reality lies beneath it... Thus the aesthetically sensitive man stands in the same relation to the reality of dreams as the philosopher does to the reality of existence.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kauffman (New York: Random House, 1967), 34.

²⁵ For a brief summation of Nietzsche’s influence on De Chirico and his notions of enigma and reality, see Caroline Tisdall, “Historical Foreword,” in Massimo Carrà, *Metaphysical Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 8-9. Thomas Mical provides a thorough analysis of De Chirico’s “Nietzschean” conception of Turin and its architecture in his article “The Origins of Architecture, After De Chirico,” *Art History* 26, no. 1 (February, 2003): 78-81.

²⁶ Giorgio de Chirico, “Meditations of a Painter” (1912), in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 397-8.

²⁷ Giorgio de Chirico, “Manuscript from the Collection of Paul Eluard,” 185-6.

The political and theoretical underpinnings of the metaphysical school offer an important inroad towards understanding the signs and symbols at play in Ault's paintings from the 1940s. Like de Chirico before him, Ault did not choose his themes arbitrarily. Even a brief perusal of his mature works reveals his concentrated interest in a handful of recurrent themes. Skyscrapers, classical sculptures, female nudes, barns, farming equipment, rural homes, and picturesque Woodstock landscapes figure into the overwhelming majority of his paintings from 1937 onwards. What these choices reveal is an engagement with the past and its attendant cultural forces similar to de Chirico's metaphysical practice, with Ault's interests being divided between both European and American artistic traditions. Through his references to "classical" visual materials such as Greek and Roman sculpture and the nude female body, Ault, like de Chirico, aligns himself with a lineage that stretches back to the ancient Mediterranean, asserting his own work as an heir to this long and celebrated history. The images of Woodstock, on the other hand, recall more "native" source material, drawing on both the subject matter and formal tropes of American folk art. Like Ault's images of the nude body, these works are not only a celebration a certain artistic heritage—in this case, American naïve painting—but an attempt to locate himself within that same tradition. The American artist's paintings are therefore rich in symbolic meanings that elaborate an ideological conception of "Americanness," the same kind of national artistic spirit that de Chirico sought to uncover in the history of Italian art. At the same time, however, these works are also deeply engaged with modernist concerns about the relationship between abstraction and realism, crafting an unusual and uncanny visual language that combines

representational subject matter with highly-simplified, quasi-abstract geometries and compositions. As in the work of the metaphysical painter that preceded him, Ault's vision of the American cultural tradition is founded on a notion of polymorphism and variety. His paintings create a "world" that is both personal and descriptive of American art as a whole, locating the sources of the nation's artistic temperament in the classical and folk pasts while simultaneously "updating" this legacy through the modern formal vocabularies of abstraction and the machine age.

Before delving into a more thorough discussion of Ault's paintings and their accordance with the metaphysical school, it is important to mark the similarities and differences between the work that de Chirico and his followers were producing and the more well-known and broadly-defined movement known as surrealism. Such differentiation must be made if it is to be argued that Ault's work is not, in fact, surrealist, as past scholars have contended. Those intersections that did occur between metaphysical painting and surrealism were largely a result of de Chirico's physical proximity to the nascent surrealist movement in the early 1910s. De Chirico lived in Paris at various times throughout his life, but the most important period he would spend there lasted from 1912 to 1915. It was during these three years that he elaborated on his conception of metaphysical painting and developed his trademark visual style of objects situated within irrational, dream-like environments, often combined with a bizarrely-manipulated sense of space, perspective, and composition. De Chirico also included extensive dream imagery in his paintings, admiring the way in which dreams could reveal the inherent metaphysical value of objects.²⁸ Parisian artists involved in the slowly-coalescing surrealist movement saw de Chirico's works

²⁸ Jewell, 39.

in exhibitions and were strongly influenced by his penchant for disconnected visual narratives and objects and forms taken from dreams. In this way, the two movements did contain important visual and thematic parallels, such that de Chirico's work is generally considered a formative influence on the surrealist movement in the visual arts.²⁹

De Chirico's time in Paris led to significant overlap between his version of metaphysical painting and the style that would later be coined surrealism, but there remained several key points on which the two groups were not in agreement. For example, the metaphysical painters did not share the surrealists' interest in automatism, or the idea that one could produce an image through an involuntary process directed by the unconscious mind. In the same way, the surrealists criticized de Chirico and the other metaphysical painters for their interest in artistic tradition and the historical past, which they felt was a betrayal of the ideological revolution that surrealism represented. In 1926, de Chirico made a public break with André Breton, the French poet who is widely considered to be the founder of the surrealist movement. For his part, Breton criticized the paintings de Chirico made after their split as being unoriginal and derivative, a sentiment that was later picked up by a number of other critics and eventually came to shape the narrative around the Italian artist's work.³⁰ From that point onwards, there could be no doubt that de Chirico and his Italian cohorts stood for something that was largely separate from the surrealist project, no matter how many correspondences the two movements may have had.

²⁹ Fiona Bradley, *Movements in Modern Art: Surrealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 34-5.

³⁰ Jewell, 5-6.

The disagreements that took place between the metaphysical painters and surrealists were ostensibly rooted in details of theory and philosophy, but at its core the division was political, having to do specifically with the way in which art was meant to celebrate or deny the idea of civilization and culture. In his seminal essay “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” historian James Clifford defined the surrealist project as one in which all cultures are seen as fully equivalent, with the result that Western modes of creativity are no longer privileged as superior. What emerges in surrealist “ethnographic” practice is a kind of absolute cultural relativism, which champions “not a parochial Western rationality but the full human potential for cultural expression.”³¹ For the visual artists of the surrealist movement, this egalitarian understanding of ethnography manifested itself most conspicuously in an engagement with African and Oceanic art, which was frequently juxtaposed with Western cultural products to produce a destabilizing effect that challenged the viewer to question standard ideas of cultural hierarchies.³² In this respect, then, surrealism was a rejection of traditional notions of art and culture, its visual disparities working on a deeper level to upend the worldview in which the Western model of art-making reigned supreme.

As Keala Jewell has ably demonstrated, the tenets of metaphysical painting as practiced by de Chirico and his contemporaries were distinctly lacking the relativist cast that characterized the work of the surrealists. Instead, their version of *Italianità*,

³¹ James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (October, 1981): 548.

³² Clifford, 563. Clifford acknowledges that the Surrealist project of cultural relativism in the arts was “all too easily co-opted by romantic notions of artistic genius or inspiration.” (552-3) For the purposes of this analysis, however, the end results of the Surrealist ethnographic project are less important than the artists’ stated positions and beliefs regarding cultural relativism, since those attitudes ultimately played a much greater role in the ideological break between that movement and metaphysical painting than any single work of art.

while acknowledging a panoply of sources and cultural epochs, remained firmly committed to upholding Italian culture as a paragon of artistic achievement. As shown in his previously-cited statements comparing the artistic propensities of the French and Italians, de Chirico believed that certain cultural groups had a richer and more powerful metaphysical character than others, with his own homeland holding the top spot in his hierarchy. Metaphysical painting was also a notable manifestation of the *rappel a l'ordre* (“return to order”), a broadly-defined movement that emerged in European art after World War I.³³ Advocating for a reexamination of classical traditions in reaction to the more overtly avant-garde sensibilities of prewar styles such as cubism and futurism, this return to order was meant to restore a sense of intelligibility and organization to art that those earlier groups had sought to undermine.³⁴ Where the surrealists viewed the war as the endpoint of ideas of beauty and culture, the metaphysical school became an especially vocal proponent of this newly-emergent classicizing impulse through its magazine *Valori Plastici*, which was published from 1918 to 1922.³⁵ De Chirico was roundly criticized by Breton and others for these “reactionary” tendencies, and later critics would even suggest that his paintings contained Fascist overtones. Whether or not de Chirico was truly in sympathy with the Fascists remains a point of debate among scholars and critics of

³³ Luca Massimo Barbero, “The Return ‘To Order’: A Theory for the Practise of Figurative Culture in the Interwar Period,” in *De Chirico and Italian Painting Between the Wars: From Futurism to the Return to Order* (Lodève: Musée de Lodève, 2003), 80.

³⁴ In addition to the metaphysical school, the return to order manifested itself in the classicizing works of artists living in France, such as Georges Braque; Pablo Picasso; and the founders of purism, Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant. Classicism also found a receptive audience in Germany, where it resulted in the development of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (“new objectivity”) movement led by artists such as Otto Dix and Georg Schrimpf. For more information on the return to order and its multiple incarnations in European art of the interwar period, see Kenneth E. Silver, “A More Durable Self,” in *Chaos & Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918-1936* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2010), 20-3.

³⁵ Tisdall, “Historical Foreword,” 15. *Valori Plastici* was also read widely outside of Italy, and was an especially formative influence for the German new objectivity movement. Silver, 23.

his work, but the fact that his paintings and their “return to order” invite such questions in the first place points to the highly traditional, even conservative, aspects of the metaphysical school’s nostalgia.³⁶ In any case, the dispute between Bréton and de Chirico makes it clear that while the surrealism may have shared certain traits with the metaphysical school, a wide ideological gulf remained between them.

It is from this theoretical foundation that I will seek to formulate a new conception of Ault’s late paintings as a distinctly American manifestation of de Chirico’s return to order. Like the artists of the metaphysical school, Ault’s merging of disparate sources was hardly all-inclusive, revolving as it did around a rather limited selection of themes that reappeared with frequency throughout his later work. Furthermore, his paintings are absent of the kinds of cultural equivalencies and critique that defined the surrealist point of view. Instead, the images from the 1940s evince a sentimental longing for the past, a past that Ault recreates through classical allusions and references to historical patterns of daily life in rural New York. And yet the modernist current in Ault’s work is always present, his citations from history continuously transformed through an idiosyncratic formal logic that merges straightforward representation with subtly abstracted imagery. The result of these efforts is a corpus that bears passing resemblances to surrealism—primarily in its reliance on curious visual disparities, dream imagery, and its passing uses of

³⁶ In a 1942 article for *VVV*, a review published by Breton, American artist and critic Robert Motherwell derided de Chirico’s late work for its “meaningless classic paraphernalia” as well as its espousal of “normative” values, which he interpreted as a collusion with the authoritarian Italian Fascist state. See Robert Motherwell, “Notes on Mondrian and de Chirico,” *VVV* 1 (June, 1942), reprinted in *The Writings of Robert Motherwell* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 17-9. In contrast, American art critic Charmion Von Wiegand wrote that de Chirico’s paintings exposed “the façade of classicism with which Fascism masks its naked brutality and intellectual bankruptcy,” revealing the political movement’s debasement and the invalidity of its historicist impulses. Quoted in Jennifer Landes, “Giorgio de Chirico and the American Critics,” in Emily Braun, ed., *Giorgio de Chirico and America* (New York: Hunter College of the City University of New York, 1996), 40-1.

abstraction—but in the end is closer in spirit the more ideologically traditionalist works of the metaphysical school that Ault himself identified as a transformative influence on his artistic trajectory.

In detailing the metaphysical environment that Ault created for himself in Woodstock, this study is divided into two sections that describe the most significant visual and ideological currents present in the artist's late work. The first chapter deals with depictions of the nude female body, seen in Ault's paintings both through studies of live models as well as through reproductions of classical sculpture. I will argue that by including these figures in his work, Ault intended not only to make direct references to de Chirico, but to identify himself as a concurrent member of the Italian artist's classical tradition in the visual arts. The second portion will consider the rural imagery that Ault produced of the area in and around Woodstock—scenes that are notable for their “surrealist” juxtapositions of structures such as barns and farmhouses within unsettling, fictive landscapes. It is here that Ault not only creates a vision of Woodstock as a rapidly-disappearing bastion of traditional agrarian lifestyles, but posits American naïve painting as a wellspring of material for a modern artistic practice. In my estimation, Ault's paintings from the 1940s invite attention for the manner in which they draw on a variety of historiographical understandings of American art, imagining themselves as the metaphorical heirs to both the classical tradition as well as the more recent history of folk art in the United States. With his formal adherence to the rigors of precisionism and his simultaneous fascination with the possibilities of the metaphysical, Ault created a world that was inevitably more

unified and coherent in its ideology, and more obviously celebratory of a national art history, than anything de Chirico himself ever produced.

Chapter 1: America as Heir: The Female Nude and the Triumph of Classicism

On the surface, George Ault's indebtedness to the metaphysical school is purely thematic. The classical sculptures and arcades that appear in his late paintings are obvious nods to de Chirico, evocations of the Italian artist's moody, desolate Italian squares. But Ault's alignment with metaphysical painting goes beyond visual quotations to encompass a much deeper philosophical attitude regarding the role of art in the modern era. In their turn to obfuscatory, baffling compositions, Ault and the metaphysical painters sought to reveal the ultimately inexplicable sources of a particular culture's character or essence, highlighting the historical forms and objects that they saw as emblematic of their nations' visual environments.

The metaphysical painter Carlo Carrà explained the movement's fundamentally nationalist project in an essay titled "Our Antiquity," written between 1916 and 1918. Rather than "reduc[ing] the spirit of art to a convenient calculation of algebra" as in the formal experiments of French cubism, Carrà argued that the Italians "have returned, almost without wishing to do so, to pure classicism... [t]he truth is that we know of no greater happiness than that of listening to ourselves."³⁷ The politics of this statement are clear: Italian artists, unlike the historically impoverished French, are so steeped in antiquity that drawing on such influences becomes a modern exploration of deep-seated tendencies that are innate to the Italian sensibility, the proverbial act of "listening to ourselves." In their efforts to conjure the quality of

³⁷ Carlo Carrà, "Our Antiquity," *Pittura Metafisica* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1919), trans. Caroline Tisdall, in Massimo Carrà, *Metaphysical Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 33.

“pure classicism” that they saw as the heart of Italian culture, metaphysical artists such as Carrà, de Chirico, and Alberto Savinio employed a multitude of visual references that recalled the peninsula’s long artistic heritage. For de Chirico, images of classical sculpture were a favored theme, his recurrent use of these forms a clear attempt to summon impressions of Italy’s storied past. These sculptures form an important part of the artist’s typically strange tableaux, placed alongside other, more banal objects from the modern world. But although they appear within an enigmatic context, de Chirico’s antique sculptures clearly read as signifiers of the “Italianness” that Carrà saw as essential to the metaphysical project, a reflection of the value that these artists placed on “perceiv[ing]... the character of a people.”³⁸

In his creation of a similarly metaphysical environment, Ault also turned to sculpture as a code for the classical tradition. His late paintings picturing sculptural fragments in incongruous settings are meant to establish a connection between his own work in the United States and an artistic heritage that originated in Greece and Rome. But Ault’s works from the 1940s also exhibit departures from de Chirico’s metaphysical formula, specifically in their recurrent use of the nude female figure. Although de Chirico painted female nudes occasionally, they do not appear with enough frequency to be considered a recurring type, as is certainly the case in Ault’s late work. In this way, the nude emerges as a unique element of Ault’s version of metaphysical painting, one that I will argue is meant to serve as a further elaboration of his ties to a European, classical lineage.

The origins and meaning of Ault’s interest in the nude can be found in his citations from de Chirico, who was partial to images of the female body rendered as a

³⁸ De Chirico, “Manuscript from the Collection of Paul Eluard,” 186.

sculptural object. For de Chirico, classical sculptures were prime carriers of metaphysical “aura” that contained a multitude of cultural connotations. De Chirico wrote that his reading of Nietzsche had made “[t]he epochs of history... appear strange and distant,” and few objects embodied the peculiarity of the past more conspicuously than Greek and Roman sculptures.³⁹ The potency of the classical style was undoubtedly heightened by its recurrence throughout the history of Western art—a classical sculpture was not just a symbol of Ancient Greece and Rome, but could also represent the Renaissance or even the neoclassical movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At the same time, de Chirico hoped to disrupt the standard connotations of classical statuary by placing it within mysterious, inscrutable compositions. In an essay titled “Statues, Furniture, and Generals” from 1917, de Chirico describes the metaphysics of sculpture and his own approach to depicting it as follows:

A statue on the façade of a palace, or in a temple, as opposed to a garden or a public place, reveals different metaphysical characteristics; on top of a palace against the southern sky it acquires a Homeric quality, a sort of severe and distant joy, mingled with melancholy. In public places its appearance comes as a surprise, especially if its pedestal is low, for then it seems to merge into the swirling of the crowd and of everyday town life... We have long been accustomed to seeing statues in museums, and the appearances of statues in the above-mentioned places has long been known and often exploited by poets as well as painters. To discover new and more mysterious aspects we must have access to new combinations. For example: a statue in a room, whether it

³⁹ Ibid., 185-6.

be alone or in the company of living people, could give us a new emotion if it were made in such a way that its feet rested on the floor and not on a base.

The same impression could be produced by a statue sitting in a *real* armchair or leaning against a *real* window.

The goal of the metaphysical artist was not, therefore, to merely reinforce established views of statuary as “Homeric” or to picture sculptures as enshrined objects in a museum, but to place the works of the past within modern contexts that would highlight their inherent strangeness and provoke “a new emotion” in both artist and viewer. The sources upon which de Chirico drew may have been ancient, but the artist’s singular focus on the metaphysical qualities of mystery and enigma was seen as an innovative and forward-thinking reimagining of these objects’ value and meaning in the contemporary world.

Evidence of metaphysical statuary abounds in de Chirico’s work beginning with the formulation of his style in the early 1910s. Perhaps the most well-known example of his interest in classical art can be found in the 1913 painting *The Uncertainty of the Poet* (fig. 1), which depicts the fragmented torso of a female nude sculpture next to a pile of bananas. In the painting’s middleground, a darkly-lit arcade recedes into the distance, where a steam train can be seen passing behind a brick wall. Art historians have noted that the form of this sculpture closely adheres to a type that was first developed by the Greek sculptor Praxiteles in the fourth century BCE for depicting the goddess Aphrodite (fig.2).⁴⁰ Praxiteles’s model served as a prototype for almost all future depictions of the female nude in Western art, rendering

⁴⁰ Rosemary Barrow, “From Praxiteles to De Chirico: Art and Reception,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 11, no. 3 (Winter, 2005): 348.

de Chirico's torso an instantly-recognizable symbol not only of classical Greece, but of a broader and more general European tradition. True to his metaphysical convictions, de Chirico creates an incongruous and unexpected juxtaposition of classical statuary with ripe fruit. The dark triangle in the bottom right-hand corner of the painting suggests the edge of a pedestal or platform, but separating this support from the shadows in the background proves more difficult. The arcade is similarly enigmatic: without knowing what kind of building it is attached to, the viewer can only recognize it as a disembodied and generic stand-in for Italian piazza architecture. Finally, the brick wall and locomotive serve as markers of industrialization and the modern era, the newest objects to be included in de Chirico's conglomeration of periods and styles. In combining such disparate objects into a single painting, de Chirico makes all of them appear strange and out-of-place, a framing tactic that calls attention to their highly metaphysical nature.

In its obsessive focus on symbols of Italian antiquity and modernity, *The Uncertainty of the Poet* was undoubtedly intended as a meditation on that nation's extensive history and rich cultural tradition. But there is more to this image than its nationalist tendencies, for it also enters into a problematic history of violence against the female body that is a recurrent element of modernism in the visual arts. Art historian Mary Ann Caws has commented on the surrealist artists' propensity for dismembering and subjugating the nude woman in their work, highlighting paintings such as René Magritte's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* of 1936 (fig. 3) as examples of "a willing relation of dominator and dominated," in which the female form is cut apart and reconfigured into jarring and ultimately dehumanizing configurations. Denied

the subjectivity that is attendant to a fully-realized depiction of the human form, the woman in Surrealist art becomes an aestheticized and disjointed object, and lacks the ability to picture herself on her own terms.⁴¹ This process is equally evident in the disparate compositions of metaphysical painting, and appears in *The Uncertainty of the Poet* through de Chirico's inclusion of the sculptural fragment. Although the torso serves as a reference to classicism, it is also a disenfranchising gesture that reduces the nude female body to an anonymous and purely physical representation, highlighting signifiers of sexuality and difference such as breasts and genitals rather than portraying a specific and complete individual. Like the surrealists, de Chirico's interest here is in the female form as a purely generalized metaphor, a stand-in for notions of "history" and "art" that excludes the possibility of female agency or an embodied depiction of the feminine subject.⁴²

On another level, the fragmentation of the female body enacted by de Chirico in *The Uncertainty of the Poet* serves as a commentary on the received notions of culture and civilization that the female nude represents. As classicist and art historian Rosemary Barrow has observed, the inclusion of a broken torso in this work, rather than a complete body, highlights the sculpture's removal "from any continuous meaning" or established conceptions about the classical female nude; its original function as a religious image of a goddess, for example, or its later role in painting as an object of male longing. Unmoored amid a composition of strange pairings, the torso alludes to the classical past but cannot offer any deeper meaning as a spiritual,

⁴¹ Mary Ann Caws, "Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 386.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 386-7.

erotic, or historical object. The result is a commentary on the fragmented and illogical state of modern life, an interpretation that is reinforced by the painting's reference to modernity via the steam train.⁴³ The eschewal of significance that Barrow describes is in line with de Chirico's Nietzschean understanding of reality as essentially incomprehensible and illusory, underlining the process by which the familiarity and comprehensibility of the everyday is stripped away to reveal an inherent strangeness. Inserted into a disorienting and unfamiliar visual environment, the broken sculpture becomes merely a displaced signifier of the past, a marker that does not provide any clues as to the purpose or meaning of de Chirico's visual paradox.

In *The Uncertainty of the Poet* and other paintings by de Chirico, there is more emphasis on creating a sense of ambiguity and confusion than on advancing a unified and easily-legible ideological statement. But there are limits to the artist's ability to evacuate meaning from his work, for even his unsolvable riddles contain a noticeable political dimension. De Chirico clearly favored certain kinds of objects based on what he saw as their innate metaphysical character. Those things that refer to Italy and its heterogeneous history and culture—be it ancient, Renaissance, or modern—contained a more powerful charge of the metaphysical, and were therefore included in his paintings with much greater frequency. This preoccupation with the relics of "Italianness" suggests that de Chirico intended to celebrate and valorize these objects and to insinuate his own connections to their makers, an interpretation that is further reinforced when seen in light of the metaphysical artists' statements on

⁴³ Barrow, 362.

antiquity and the continuing relevancy of classical art.⁴⁴ Though his painted sculptures do little more than gesture towards the past, the forms that de Chirico chose to include in his work nevertheless substantiate his politicized understanding of metaphysical art as an inherently national endeavor.

In Ault's formulation of the metaphysical, the relationship to classicism proposed by de Chirico is necessarily adjusted to fit within an American context. An artist from the United States could not claim to have absorbed the tenets of the antique tradition "along with our mothers' milk," as Carlo Carrà claimed was the case with the Italian painters of the metaphysical school.⁴⁵ But while Ault did not have pride of original ownership regarding the heritage of European art, he could still cast himself as a contemporary inheritor and proponent of that tradition who was working both to preserve it and to continue it forward. This act of self-positioning places Ault within a larger group of American artists and critics working during this period who saw their country as the rightful heir to a history of art-making that began in Greece and Rome.

The roots of the "classical" designation in early twentieth-century American art were often formal rather than thematic. The American art dealer Charles Daniel, noted for his promotion of Precisionist artists, referred to the members of the movement as the "New Classicists" for their paintings' sharp geometry and reductive compositions, which he felt aligned them both with the simplicity of the antique style as well as the reductive abstraction of European avant-garde movements such as

⁴⁴ Jewell, 39-40.

⁴⁵ Carrà, 37.

Cubism.⁴⁶ Similarly, critic Constance Rourke described the work of Ault's contemporary Charles Sheeler as representative of a "classic mode, which has truly belonged to us [Americans] and which, broadly, may belong to us again."⁴⁷ In many cases, this celebration of the classical was intended to mediate between the representational aesthetic still favored by many American artists and the tendencies towards abstraction that were present in contemporary European art movements.⁴⁸ When critics like Rourke invoked the "classic mode," it was often to make a clear suggestion that this tradition—which simultaneously balanced a reverence for the past with the advanced formal experiments of modernist painting—was now solely in the possession of the United States. In its almost complete turn away from a representational aesthetic, the avant-garde of Europe had forsaken their own heritage, leaving any further development of the classical style exclusively to American artists.⁴⁹

For its part, the metaphysical school did consider formal elements to be a part of its modernized classical worldview. In 1920, De Chirico wrote in *Valori Plastici* that "Nature itself was seen by the classical painter with the eye of an architect and builder," and that this "architectural" approach—characterized by geometric

⁴⁶ Gail Stavitsky, "Precisionist Directions in American Art, 1915-1941," in *Precisionism in America 1915-1941: Reordering Reality*, ed. Diana Murphy (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 21.

⁴⁷ Constance Rourke, *Charles Sheeler: Artist in the American Tradition* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 193.

⁴⁸ For other discussions of the "classical" in American art, see Robert Allerton Parker, "The Classical Vision of Charles Sheeler," *International Studio* 24 (May 1926): 68-72. This essay proposes an even clearer distinction between "classical" American realism and the experiments with abstraction that were taking place in Europe.

⁴⁹ For more information on the critical and artistic engagement with classicism in early American modernism, see Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 335-6.

simplicity—was a foundation of the metaphysical style.⁵⁰ Ault's stylistic vocabulary (and that of many other American artists at this time) adheres closely to the simplified, architectonic viewpoint advocated both by De Chirico and by American art critics, allowing his paintings to fit well within the rather conservative boundaries of the modern classical aesthetic, which, as the existence of the metaphysical school ably demonstrates, did not flourish solely in the United States. But unlike other American artists such as Sheeler, Ault's intersections with the art of the ancient world go beyond formal treatments. For Ault, the classical is embodied not only in the artist's emphasis on geometry but in his frequent citations of specific ancient forms. By incorporating examples of antique art into his work, Ault brings himself into alignment with the metaphysical school in a way that distinguishes him from his precisionist peers and marks his own particular brand of classicized American painting.

In examining Ault's articulation of a nationalist, metaphysical viewpoint, it is helpful to begin with the most de Chirico-esque of his compositions: the 1945 painting *Sculpture on a Roof* (fig. 4). It is here that the American artist created the most clearly recognizable parallels with the metaphysical school, allowing us to understand how these visual quotations were meant to function within his own particular situation. The painting depicts three sculptural fragments on the rooftop of a skyscraper in what is most likely New York City. One of these artifacts is a female torso missing its head and arms, the second comprises the pelvis and legs of a male figure, and the third is a detached head on a pedestal. In the background, a group of even taller buildings rises up towards swirling clouds, their façades delineated with

⁵⁰ See Jewell, 5.

varying levels of detail. The parallels with de Chirico's work arise not only from Ault's inclusion of classical sculptural forms, but from his juxtaposition of these fragments with objects that are meant to signify modernity; in this case, towering skyscrapers fill the role usually served by trains in de Chirico's paintings. The brick wall that encloses the rooftop is an even more direct citation from de Chirico, since the Italian artist made use of this same device in a number of his works. The pointed arches of the building in the background resemble a cathedral, and recall de Chirico's fascination with arcades. Furthermore, the windows and door on the white wall in the right foreground evoke the steeply sloped perspectival arrangements found in many images by the Italian artist, including *The Uncertainty of the Poet*.

The combination of these allusions within *Sculpture on a Roof* suggests that this painting was an intentional reference to de Chirico, an homage to the artist that Ault saw as a formative influence on his work. The source of Ault's composition could have been derived from a number of paintings by De Chirico, including *The Uncertainty of the Poet* or any of his images that depict a sculpture of the mythological figure Ariadne, such as *The Joys and Enigmas of a Strange Hour* (1913), *Ariadne* (1913), *Ariadne's Afternoon* (1913), or *The Soothsayer's Recompense* (1913) (figs. 5-8). All of these works exhibit the same visual tropes that Ault makes use of in *Sculpture on a Roof*: the classical sculpture contrasted with signs of contemporaneity, the arcade structure, and the brick wall used to enclose the composition. But as a painting by an American artist, *Sculpture on a Roof* employs classicism to different ends, indicating that the values of European civilization have been transferred across the Atlantic and into the modern urban environment.

True to the metaphysical style formulated by de Chirico, *Sculpture on a Roof* exhibits a significant degree of impenetrability in its placement of ancient relics within the unexpected context of a modern American rooftop. Ault, however, does provide the viewer with certain clues to suggest his underlying motivations, the first being the space in which the sculptures are situated. As previously noted, the windows on the wall that encloses the rooftop recall the receding arcade device that de Chirico used so frequently in his paintings. For de Chirico, these arcades marked the limits of the piazza, a space that was both distinctly Italian and clearly weighted with numerous historical significations.⁵¹ In Ault's painting, the piazza is reimagined as an urban rooftop, a "square" in which the sculptural fragments are framed to highlight their latent metaphysical properties. The arched windows of the cathedral in the background serve as another framing device, but also represent a manifestation of traditional European design principles—in this case, the Gothic arch—within a modern American architectural setting. Positioned in the painting's middleground, the cathedral's intimations of medieval history add richness to the continental artistic milieu that Ault sees as the wellspring for modern American civilization. What emerges in this image is the same cultural panoply or polymorphism that defined de Chirico's work. Here, Ault not only lays claim to the classical tradition embodied in the sculptures, but suggests that it remains a part of the American temperament that has expressed itself in the urbanized environment of New York.

With its amalgamation of skyscrapers and antique art, Ault's painting enters into a longstanding debate in American art criticism about the aesthetic value of skyscrapers and of urbanism more generally. Since the turn of the century, American

⁵¹ See Jewell, 43 for a discussion of the arcade as a symbol of continuity with the past.

critics had sparred over whether tall, steel-framed buildings were an eyesore and abomination or a singular achievement of American ingenuity and design. In the former camp, writer Henry James referred to the skyscraper as a “fifty-floored conspiracy against the very idea of ancient graces,” an unwelcome intrusion into the American landscape that undermined traditional ideals of beauty in architecture.⁵² Others disagreed with this negative assessment, such as the critic Mary Fanton Roberts, who wrote that “the skyscraper is the first absolutely genuine expression of an original American architecture,” as well as Marcel Duchamp, who exclaimed that “America is the country of the art of the future... Look at the skyscrapers! Has Europe anything to show more beautiful than these? New York itself is a work of art, a complete work of art.”⁵³ For these artists and critics, the skyscraper was the result of a uniquely American innovation and a pinnacle of modernity that was to be celebrated, not condemned. The traditions of Europe were in the past, and the United States would be the vanguard of a new aesthetic that would carry art and architecture into the future. Rather than take a partisan stance on this issue, however, Ault’s *Sculpture on a Roof* reflects elements of both positions, suggesting a continuity between the skyscraper and the architectural styles that preceded it.

Like de Chirico and the other metaphysical painters before him, Ault does not imply a hierarchy of value for the objects in *Sculpture on a Roof* that would suggest his favor for either the antique or the modern. Instead, the viewer is meant to see the sculptures and buildings only as an amalgam, one that offers a new, disembodied

⁵² Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1907), 92.

⁵³ Mary Fanton Roberts [Giles Edgerton], “How New York has Redeemed Herself from Ugliness—An Artist’s Revelation of the Beauty of the Skyscraper,” *The Craftsman* 15 (January, 1907): 458; Marcel Duchamp, quoted in “The Nude-Descending-a-Staircase Man Surveys Us,” *New York Tribune*, September 12, 1915.

perspective on familiar forms. The ideological import of this work is of a more generalized nationalist sentiment—the notion of America as the conservator of classicism and European ideals that was described by individuals such as Charles Daniel and Constance Rourke. For Ault, all of the objects included here form part of the American aesthetic experience, and each plays an important and enduring role in defining the nation’s (and, by extension, his own) artistic practice. To make this point more clearly, Ault organizes the painting “chronologically,” with the oldest artifacts situated in the foreground. From there, the viewer’s eye is drawn towards the cathedral with its medieval influences, and finally towards the skyscraper in the distance. The result is an historical continuum, in which one era passes into and informs those that follow. Ault does not describe urbanism as a necessary break with the past or champion a reactionary return to the antique, but imagines both the historic and the contemporary as facets of the United States’ metaphysical environment in the mid-1940s.

While *Sculpture on a Roof* deals with the sources of inspiration for the American artistic tradition as a whole, most of Ault’s other paintings that depict classical sculpture elaborate the artist’s personal connections to the heritage of the past. The next significant work in this group is *Nude and Torso* (1945) (fig. 9). The composition of the painting is minimal and straightforward: a nude woman—the model was Ault’s wife, Louise—wearing blue socks stands in a doorway facing away from the viewer. To her left, a fragment of a marble sculpture of Aphrodite rests on the floor.⁵⁴ As in *Sculpture on a Roof*, the torso serves as a reference to de Chirico

⁵⁴ Susan Lubowsky notes that this sculpture was originally purchased by Ault’s father in London, and was used as the model for the female torso in *Sculpture on a Roof* (see Lubowsky, 33, 40)

and his fascination with cultural symbols. And though this image is sparser than most works by the Italian artist, it nevertheless retains an aura of mystery that suggests an interest in the metaphysical. Why, for example, is this woman standing in a doorway wearing only her socks? What does she see beyond the threshold that the viewer cannot? And why is the space otherwise empty save for the sculpture, which is too small to be properly displayed on the floor? Here, the placement of the statue recalls de Chirico's suggestion for depicting sculpture in "Statues, Furniture, and Generals." As with all metaphysical painting, the exact circumstances of the scene are less important than its underlying suggestions. In this image, Ault establishes a parity between the live model and statuary that is key to understanding the place of the female nude within his larger oeuvre.

As forms that were closely associated with antiquity and Greek art in particular, marble sculptures of women, whether clothed or, more often, nude, served as easily-recognizable markers of the classical tradition throughout much of the history of Western art, and it is for this reason that de Chirico turned to them so frequently in his work. Not only do these objects serve as a representation of European art history, they are also physical artifacts from a departed era that must have seemed far removed from early twentieth-century society. Ault was equally aware of the associations that antique statues contained, and put them to use in paintings like *Sculpture on a Roof*. But *Nude and Torso* goes one step further, creating a clear visual parallel between the fragmented torso and the woman who stands near it. Where the sculpture represents the physical body transformed through the artistic process into an object of permanence, the model is the source of

inspiration for both sculptor and painter. This comparison is aided in the fact that both the woman and the sculpture remain anonymous, making the idea of their relationship seem more plausible. In this sense, Ault is reenacting a process with a long tradition in Western painting. Rosemary Barrow writes the female nude (depicted as a living person and not as a sculpture) emerged as a visual type during the Renaissance to serve the role of the classical sculpture “translated into ‘flesh.’” Statues and live models were used interchangeably “to produce classicizing images of the human body,” so that the female nude eventually “transcend[ed] conventional art-historical categorization to assume a reputation as a symbol of the classical tradition in art and, indeed, of art itself.”⁵⁵ By picturing his model next to her “representation” as Aphrodite in stone, Ault makes this line of reasoning explicit, allowing the figures to function as stand-ins for one another and to serve as generalized, metaphorical representations of both the art-making process and of classicism more specifically.

Ault’s female model and her sculpted companion constitute an unambiguous gesture towards the antique and its concomitant associations with the history of Western art. But there is also a conspicuously “modern” current to this image, one that is embodied most forcefully in the work’s subtle allusions to an abstract visual language. This tendency is particularly visible in Ault’s treatment of the woman’s back, where an accurate rendering of spinal anatomy is sacrificed in favor of a play of sinuous lines and rippling shadows, a technique that suggests the details of her body while simultaneously reducing her form to a series of interconnected shapes. Similarly, the sculpture on the floor has been reduced to its most essential elements, the finer details such as nipples and cracks eliminated in favor of a rounded,

⁵⁵ Barrow, 354-6.

geometric arrangement of lines and circles. It is in these extreme simplifications and formal reductions that Ault seeks to navigate the divide between ancient and modern represented by the “classical” aesthetic, as advocated for by critics like Charles Daniel and Constance Rourke. The result is a new proposition for a modernist mode of representation, one that calls upon the clarity of the classical mode while taking this tendency to a new, almost abstracted level of simplified design.

The generalized equivalency that *Nude and Torso* establishes between the female body, its sculptural representation, and the classical tradition reveals a problematic sexual politics in Ault’s work, one with a long precedent in the history of Western art. Art historian Nanette Salomon has chronicled the history of the female nude with an eye towards the particularities of its gendered representation, arguing that “the vulnerable, sexualized female nude is the culturally fabricated site and the public display of heterosexual desire.” In picturing women as modest, helpless beings—a tendency that Salomon first observes in Praxiteles’s *Knidian Aphrodite* (fig. 2) and traces into the modern era—male artists emphasize female sexuality and encourage a voyeuristic spectatorship in a way that is not paralleled in depictions of the male nude.⁵⁶ This process is clearly reenacted in Ault’s *Nude and Torso*. Her face obscured by virtue of her stance, Louise is unable to address the viewer, and subsequently becomes a physical object to be looked at and scrutinized. The modesty of her pose encourages this kind of gazing, inviting the viewer to speculate about the parts of her body that she has hidden from view. Situated next to the torso, she is an

⁵⁶ Nanette Salomon, “The Venus Pudica: Uncovering Art History’s ‘Hidden Agendas’ and Pernicious Pedigrees,” in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996), 83.

interchangeable stand-in for ideas of art and culture, lacking the identifying features that would render her an individual.

In its emphasis on the sexualized female body and its encouragement of an aggressive, objectifying gaze, Ault's painting recalls the highly charged sexual politics of surrealist and metaphysical art. But while he employs the same torsos and fragments as de Chirico, Ault's inclusion of a live model in this work represents a more traditional use of the female nude in line with earlier, pre-modern conventions. The musings on fractured modernity present in works like de Chirico's *The Uncertainty of the Poet* are scrapped in favor of a clearly articulated and unproblematic lineage from antique past to American present. As a living model posing in the present day, Ault's nude is not only a marker of the classical tradition but its embodiment in the modern world. In painting her form, the artist mirrors the act of creation represented by the sculpture and becomes a carrier and emissary of the ideals that these objects represent. The conspicuous violence found in the surrealists' tortured female body is gone, replaced with a less forceful but still highly eroticized act of viewing that reduces the female nude to an aestheticized object of consumption.

Like *Sculpture on a Roof, Nude and Torso* images the vitality of the classical in early twentieth-century American art, but the intimacy of this scene also creates a much stronger correlation with Ault himself. Where skyscrapers serve to represent the United States in the broadest sense, the nude woman in the doorway implies the process of modeling in a studio setting, a specific act of creation that is carried out by a particular artist. The work thus leaves little doubt that Ault is the one who will

continue to sustain the Western tradition, updating its tenets for new era while remaining cognizant of its past.

Ault's self-fashioning as a solitary pioneer of classicism emerges as a theme in other paintings as well, particularly *The Artist at Work* from 1946 (fig. 10). Here, the artist pictures himself alone in his Woodstock studio, absorbed in the process of creating another painting at his easel. The immaculate arrangement of the studio space is reinforced by the painting's hard-edged clarity and strongly geometrical composition. At the bottom of the stairs on the right side of the painting is the now-familiar female torso. Where *Nude and Torso* only intimated the relationship between artist and sculpture, the placement of the fragment within the space of Ault's studio makes explicit the object's role as both an artist's reference tool and font of inspiration. On the wall further up the stairs hangs a small painting of a reclining nude woman, its presence in the scene enacting a dichotomy between the ancient form below and its later recreation through the medium of painting. It is impossible to tell whether this painting is meant to be a work by Ault or by another artist that he admires, but its status as a symbol for "art" is the same in either case.

Going one step beyond *Nude and Torso*, which leaves Ault to the role of unseen creator working behind the canvas, *The Artist at Work* establishes an emphatic and unambiguous correlation between the artist himself and the long history embodied in the female nude. Surrounded by reminders of classical civilization both ancient and modern, Ault draws inspiration from these works while constructing his own uniquely American stylistic and thematic vocabulary. But this relationship with the female body is just as difficult as the one that emerged in *Nude and Torso*. Where

Ault personifies the qualities of vision, inspiration, and creation represented by the male artist at his easel, the female form is reduced to a series of passive and anonymous signifiers of classicism. The small size of the torso and painting within the studio do not invite the same kind of sexual undertones as in the earlier work, but the woman's status as aestheticized object cannot be denied. For Ault, then, the female nude functions as a generic symbol of artistic tradition, one that ignores the specificity of the subject in favor of the body's metaphorical significance and encoded historical associations.

When seen within the context of metaphysical painting and its ideological agenda, Ault's use of the female nude appears to have a relatively straightforward, if problematic, function. Both the sculptural fragment and the live model serve as embodiments of classicism and Western art brought forth into the present day, allowing these traditions to reassert themselves not only in the larger American visual environment but within Ault's oeuvre more specifically. But the paintings discussed thus far cannot fully describe the ways in which this formula was applied in Ault's late work. Although it was completed before *Nude and Torso* and *The Artist at Work*, I will turn now to the 1944 painting *Memories of the Coast of France* (fig. 11), a painting that elucidates the final dimension of Ault's classical turn in his images of the female nudes. In this image, Ault enacts a scenario in which the artist is not only an heir to the European tradition, but also its savior in the face of possible destruction.

Among Ault's works that feature nudes, *Memories of the Coast of France* is perhaps the most perplexing and opaque. The painting depicts a beach on the eponymous French coast. In the middleground, a peninsula of sand juts out into the

sea, punctuated by a number of weathered rock formations twisted into “Dalí-like shapes.”⁵⁷ In the background are the remains of a shipwreck, indicated by a mast that rises from the sand. In the foreground, a nude woman sits on a rock inside a tidal pool, her face left completely blank. If the rocks and shipwreck were not unusual enough, the woman’s presence is an even more confusing addition to this scene.

Given the painting’s completion date of 1944, its title and subject are undoubtedly intended as references to the war that was currently sweeping Europe; it was on June 6, 1944 that the Allied forces invaded France along a coastline very similar to the one that Ault depicts. This reading of the work as an allusion to the war is supported by statements from Louise Ault. In one of three memoirs written about her time with Ault in Woodstock, Louise observes that the artist was deeply shaken by France’s surrender to the Nazis. Nemerov notes that the clouds in this image take on “aggressive shapes such as arrowheads and cockscombs,” and Louise echoes this idea of the painting’s hidden violence, writing in her memoir that the clouds “seemed to betray his nervous uneasiness concerning the outcome of the war.”⁵⁸ The combination of disparate imagery certainly creates a sense of disquiet, but there is more to this work than the aura of wartime anxiety that Louise describes. Once again, the key to understanding the painting lies in Ault’s use of the nude, whose inclusion in this scene suggests the threat that the war posed to the European artistic heritage.

Although Ault lived and worked in the United States for most of his life, he also spent significant time in Europe. His family moved to London in 1899 when he

⁵⁷ Nemerov, 30.

⁵⁸ Nemerov, 30; Louise Ault, *Remember a Thistle: A Novel (Factual)*, unpublished manuscript, 127-8. Collection of Maurice and Suzanne Vanderwoude, quoted in Nemerov, 30.

was eight years old and lived there for twelve years, with the result that he spent the majority of his childhood and adolescence abroad. During this time, the Ault family spent their summers in Cap Gris-Nez on the northern coast of France.⁵⁹ *Memories of the Coast of France* can therefore be read as a nostalgic reimagining of Ault's childhood vacations, tinged with a distinct sense of foreboding. The shipwreck in the background recalls the violence of the D-Day landing, while the contorted, anthropomorphic rocks and ominous clouds transform the landscape into one that is recognizable, but also distorted and sinister.⁶⁰ The painting's off-kilter environment suggests a world recalled from memory or seen in dreams, where otherwise ordinary elements of the landscape take on new and unusual significance. Here again, Ault has created an image that is resolutely within the realm of the metaphysical, transforming an ordinary landscape into one that resonates with a feeling of unknowable significance.

While the standard appraisal of this painting as a meditation on the war explains much about its inscrutable scenery, it cannot account for the nude woman who remains its most distinctive feature. If we accept the previously established interpretation of the nude as a stand-in for European culture, then it is possible to see this figure as yet another aspect of Ault's memories of France. That memory would include Ault's experience of the Western tradition through his visits to museums in London and Paris, as well as the artistic training that he received as a student at

⁵⁹ Nemerov, 27.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

several different universities in the British capital.⁶¹ Louise noted that George often referred to the time he spent in Europe as his “happiest years,” and that “love of Europe was a strong element in his life.”⁶² Thus, the woman can be read as a reminder of more pleasant times, and a tribute to the ideas that Ault absorbed on the other side of the Atlantic. But as Louise noted, the overall mood of this work is one of melancholy and distress, and it should not be understood as an escapist recollection of the past. It is more fitting to think of *Memories of the Coast of France* as an elegy to a world that Ault feared was on the verge of collapse. The nude woman in this scene is highly vulnerable, surrounded by ruin and inserted into an environment that appears barren and hostile. The history of Western art that she represents is therefore at risk, its future tenuous. More so than the clouds, rocks, or shipwreck, it is this aspect of the painting that creates the greatest sense of dread, for it represents Ault’s fear that the Europe he remembered and admired would be consumed by the horrors of the war.

And yet once again, Ault’s role as the creator of this work remains an important consideration when seeking to decode its mysteries. As in *Nude and Torso*, the depiction of the nude model serves as both a reaffirmation and update of the classical, Western tradition, an entry into a longer continuum that is meant to stand on equal footing with the past. The title of the painting offers another clue: Ault’s memories of France are all that remains of the time he spent in Europe, and in transposing them onto canvas, he has chronicled them in a tangible, permanent

⁶¹ While in London Ault attended University College School; The Slade School, Department of Art of London University; and St. John’s Wood Art School. “George Ault.” George Ault Papers, Archives of American Art.

⁶² Louise Ault, “George Ault – 1924,” documentation written for a collector, Mr. Bender, n.d. George Ault Papers, Archives of American Art.

format. This act of preservation is valuable beyond its personal significance for the artist, for it is simultaneously a safeguard against the threats to European heritage that are represented within the image itself. Like all of his other works that include the female nude, this painting situates Ault as an ambassador of tradition working in the present. But in light of the ongoing war and its destruction of both objects and ideas, Ault's familiar role takes on a new urgency. No longer a single player among many who are working to reappraise the past, he is now one of the last bastions of tradition at a time when the history of art is literally dissolving around him. Louise hints at this idea in her recollections of Ault's response to the war: describing his reaction to the camouflaged ocean liners in a New York Harbor, she wrote that "[h]is peace would be destroyed, he would want to fight and not until he was at his easel again, creating formal harmony—on his canvas bringing order out of chaos—would he relax, would good be affirmed, serenity established."⁶³ Ault's act of "creating formal harmony," of "bringing order out of chaos," works to reaffirm the standards of beauty that the war was constantly threatening to tear asunder. The unreality of *Memories of the Coast of France* should not be thought of as an obstacle or hindrance to Ault's intention of ensconcing history, for the distortions of metaphysical painting were believed to reveal the innate truth of a scene in a way that straightforward naturalism could not. In picturing the metaphysical environment of France, Ault looks to capture intangible aspects of the country's "essence" while simultaneously recording them for posterity.

The invocation of the Western tradition embodied in Ault's use of classical sculptures and live models ultimately serves a number of somewhat contradictory

⁶³ Louise Ault, *Remember a Thistle*, 112-3, quoted in Nemerov, 32.

functions. On the one hand it is a distinctly Europeanizing and modernizing gesture, a reference to de Chirico and the metaphysical school intended to place Ault among the ranks of advanced artists who were working abroad in the first half of the twentieth century. At the same time, however, it is also an unambiguous celebration of American achievement in the arts, a nationalist overture that simultaneously demonstrates a rather traditional reverence and admiration for the classical past. This dichotomy might be seen as symptomatic of larger issues surrounding American art-making and criticism at this point in time. In their attempts to establish and define a unique American identity, artists and critics sought to imbue the art of the United States with the weight and significance of the centuries-old classical tradition, while simultaneously proclaiming it as a highly modern and localized “update” of that same legacy. The tension between contemporaneity and the historical existed for the metaphysical school as well, calling as it did for a “return to order” while simultaneously proclaiming itself as a cutting-edge movement at the forefront of artistic practice.

While Ault’s work may not fit neatly into categories such as traditional and modern, European and American, it is not necessary to analyze it in these terms to understand the way in which it both reflects an historical situation and creates its own space within the history of American art. In his allusions to the antique, Ault subscribes to a historiographical model that saw American artists as the heirs of classicism, a critical understanding that was pervasive and well-accepted by the 1940s. At the same time, however, his interest in the metaphysical devices of inscrutability and enigma (traits that have been identified previously as “surrealist”)

aligns him with the Italian movement in a way that is distinct from any other American artist working at this time. Ault's metaphysical compositions consequently represent a unique engagement with European avant-garde modes at midcentury, one in which the metaphysical symbols of classicism and *Italianità* were applied to a decidedly boosterish version of American modernism.

Chapter 2: America as Source: Woodstock Landscapes and the Creation of an Indigenous Art

When George and Louise Ault moved to Woodstock in 1937, their goal was a fresh start and a new life away from the hectic environment of New York City.

George had struggled with alcoholism since the late 1920s, and his erratic behavior and propensity for confrontation and brawls had alienated him from many of his closest friends. In addition, his relationship with the gallery network in the city had taken a decided turn for the worse. Ault's primary dealer and exhibitor had been Edith Halpert of the Downtown Gallery, who was known for her determined promotion of celebrated American modernists such as Stuart Davis, Charles Demuth, and Marsden Hartley. But Ault chafed and bristled at her management, feeling that she limited his creative freedom by directing him to make more salable images, and their relationship came to an end in 1934. Feeling ostracized and shunned by his peers, Ault hoped that he and Louise could achieve a measure of self-sufficiency in their newfound isolation. Renting a small cabin with only the most basic provisions—it lacked even running water and electricity—their goal was to make enough money from sales of George's art to buy their own piece of land and build a home on it. While George sold the occasional painting, the expected financial windfall never came, and he died in an even direr financial situation than when they had first moved.⁶⁴

Though the Aults' rustic accommodations in Woodstock were largely a result of their poverty, George relished the opportunity to live in a manner that recalled the

⁶⁴ Lubowsky, 24, 28, 42.

“old agrarian Catskill life,” which he admired for its simplicity and lack of pretense.⁶⁵ But Woodstock was also the home of a well-known art colony that attracted a large contingent of artists from New York City, many of whom opted to purchase summer homes in town beginning in the 1920s and 30s. The result of this demographic shift was an increasing cosmopolitanism and a gradual erasure of the quaint, old-fashioned lifestyle that George cherished so deeply.⁶⁶ In yet another act of social withdrawal, Ault eschewed any interaction with the colony and its members, arguing that he was not interested in their “nonsense.”⁶⁷ At home with Louise, he lamented the way in which transplants from the city had altered both the physical landscape of Woodstock as well as its secluded, bucolic character.⁶⁸ Yet this repudiation of his fellow artists did little to thwart their transformation of the town and its environment, and Ault could only watch with aversion as his adopted home was slowly remade into a holiday destination for cultural elites.

The enthusiasm that George felt for his new situation in Woodstock is reflected in many of his paintings from the 1940s. In these images of country homes and picturesque landscapes, Ault evokes a potent nostalgia for the town’s traditional rural atmosphere, one that he hoped to emulate in his new life with Louise. But as much as these works are a celebration of the environment in which Ault lived, they are also highly invented, meant to recreate a world that had largely disappeared by the time of the artist’s arrival. It is here that the metaphysical comes into play once again, for Ault’s reimagining of a more pastoral Woodstock relied strongly on the

⁶⁵ Louise Ault, “His attitudes on painting, process, and technique,” documentation written for a collector, Mr. Bender, n.d. George Ault Papers, Archives of American Art

⁶⁶ Lubowsky, 28.

⁶⁷ Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, 33.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

Italian movement's visual language of dream imagery and constructed compositions. Since the town's physical environment had been irrevocably altered by the transplants from New York, Ault simply reimagined it as it may have looked in the past, a process that resulted in works with the distinct markings of a dreamlike unreality. These late paintings also demonstrate a fascination with the roots of culture and civilization that recalls the metaphysical investigations of the Italian school. Unlike de Chirico, however, Ault's depictions of Woodstock became increasingly focused on a cohesive historical vision, rather than a panoply of cultural forms from different periods in time. The result is a body of work that employs the theoretical underpinnings of metaphysical painting—its fascination with enigma, history, dreams, and the imagination—to create a more focused and historically-situated vision of Woodstock in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With his final paintings of the Catskill region, Ault sought to replicate specific and recognizable moments in the area's past, availing himself of metaphysical tropes to conjure what was no longer visible in the actual landscape. In this sense, then, these works serve as a wistful response to the rapid changes taking place in Woodstock, a melancholic commemoration of a community that was soon to be obviated and forgotten.

Ault's interest in Woodstock's historical past results in one other departure from de Chirico's metaphysical model. In its recreation of the town's fading agrarian community, Ault's work recalls the traditional subjects of nineteenth-century American folk art. Produced largely by self-taught artists working outside the country's customary artistic centers, folk art is typified by images of daily life in rural communities that are extremely similar to the scenes Ault produced late in his career.

Furthermore, George's reductive, geometric visual style recalls the formal qualities of folk painting, which was celebrated for its untrained or "naïve" look characterized by strong linearity and simplified compositions.⁶⁹ With their thematic and stylistic gestures to folk art, Ault's images of Woodstock gesture to a tradition of art-making that is wholly American in its history. As he continued to engage with the landscape around his home, his renderings of the area moved from generic, generalized scenes towards a more specific reimagining of the past that included recognizable Catskill landmarks and historical figures. Though they remain tied to the metaphysical school through their invented, fantastic scenery and fascination with cultural metaphysics, these paintings avoid the references to the classical tradition elaborated by de Chirico and echoed in Ault's paintings of female nudes. Rather, Ault's paintings of Woodstock expound his conception of a second and apparently compatible genealogy for modern American art, one that saw its origins in the country's own history rather than the formidable traditions of the antique.

Ault's self-fashioning as an artist working in an indigenous American tradition was hardly unique in the 1930s and 1940s. On the contrary, the notion that folk art could serve as a creative touchstone for American modernism had been gaining steam for some time. The trend had ostensibly begun with the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks, who in a 1918 article titled "On Creating a Usable Past" beseeched American writers to assemble a new literary canon, one that would create "a sense of brotherhood in effort and in aspiration which is the best promise of a national culture." If the American literary establishment could determine what works

⁶⁹ Lynette I. Rhodes, *American Folk Art: From the Traditional to the Naïve* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978), 9, 95.

of the past had the most value for their present situation, he reasoned, then the result would be a fecund source of inspiration for all future endeavors in American letters.⁷⁰ In the realm of the visual arts, Brooks's call to identify a "usable past" was answered in large part by the critics Constance Rourke and Holger Cahill. In her 1935 essay "American Art: A Possible Future," Rourke argued that "the American painter might gain assurance in a contemporary mode if he knew by heart the spare abstract as this appears in many phases of our folk-expression."⁷¹ The traditional crafts of American Puritan and pioneer communities, previously seen as crude and graceless, were now to be admired for their simple, unpretentious aesthetic, one that recalled modernist investigations into abstraction and the reduction of objects to their essential forms. In this way, folk art could be profitably mined as a "usable past" by the most advanced American artists, establishing a precedent for their work that situated them within a national, rather than foreign, legacy.⁷²

In a critical move similar to Rourke's, Holger Cahill opined that folk painting and sculpture exhibited a "definite relation to certain vital elements in contemporary American art" through their "indifference to surface realism."⁷³ In picturing the world around them, the best living American artists sought to reduce their compositions to a bare minimum of forms that ignored the minute details of "surface realism," producing a modernist abstract visual language that recalled the clean,

⁷⁰ Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past" (1918), reprinted in *Van Wyck Brooks: The Early Years*, ed. Claire Sprague (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 226.

⁷¹ Constance Rourke, "American Art: A Possible Future," *Magazine of Art*, July 1935, reprinted in Constance Rourke, *The Roots of American Culture and Other Essays*, ed. Van Wyck Brooks (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1942), 293.

⁷² Corn, 320-1.

⁷³ Holger Cahill, "Folk Art: Its Place in the American Tradition," *Parnassus* 4 (March 1932): 1-4. Reprinted in *Folk Nation: Folklore in the Creation of American Tradition*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 168.

sparse surfaces of traditional folk art and design. While working at the Newark Museum in New Jersey and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Cahill organized several large exhibition of American folk art in 1932 that sparked a craze for these artifacts.⁷⁴ Drawn to what they felt was its inherently modern sensibility, American artists collected folk art with particular intensity—Sheeler decorated his home with numerous pieces of Shaker furniture and decorative arts, while Louise Ault wrote that her husband “was among those enthusiastically collecting ‘early American.’”⁷⁵

Ault’s onetime dealer Edith Halpert also played an instrumental role in creating a market for folk art before World War II. At her Downtown Gallery, she exhibited paintings by contemporary artists side-by-side with historical pieces from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In discussing the work of the artists she represented, Halpert described “a purely American tradition stemming from the meticulous folk artists... little influenced by foreign sources.”⁷⁶ This statement reveals an essential tenet of the folk art revival: not only were these historical pieces believed to be a forerunner of modernism, they were also evidence of a singularly American artistic disposition that could not be claimed by Europe. Much of the contemporary criticism of Ault’s work echoes Halpert’s perspective. Describing a 1925 exhibition of Ault’s paintings, the curator of the installation, Stephen Bourgeois,

⁷⁴ Virginia Tuttle Clayton, Elizabeth Stillinger, and Erika Lee Doss, *Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2002), 21. The exhibitions produced by Cahill included *American Primitives: An Exhibit of the Paintings of Nineteenth Century Folk Artists* (Newark Museum, 1930), *American Folk Sculpture: The Work of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Craftsmen* (Newark Museum, 1931), and *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America 1750-1900* (Museum of Modern Art, 1932).

⁷⁵For more information on Sheeler’s collection of American folk art, see Corn, 313; Louise Ault, “George Ault – 1924.” George Ault Papers, Archives of American Art.

⁷⁶ Edith Halpert, “American Folk Art,” n.d., in Downtown Gallery Records, Archives of American Art.

wrote that Ault and the other members of the show were “the primitives of a real American school of painting.”⁷⁷ The use of the term “primitives” has a double meaning here. In one sense, Ault and his fellow artists were drawing on and reviving a legacy of “primitive” American art that stretched back to the colonial era, a recovery of the past that lent their work a certain naïve sensibility. At the same time, they were also the “primitive,” nascent forerunners of a newly-unearthed usable past, the artists who were making the first tentative steps towards establishing what Bourgeois termed “a real American school.” The embrace of “primitive” or naïve art by American artists and critics was thus a tool towards freeing the country’s art from its fraught relationship to Europe, the continent that was often seen as the true standard bearer of contemporaneity in the first half of the twentieth century.⁷⁸

In “American Art: A Possible Future,” Rourke wrote that by turning towards a folk past, American artists were “trying... to do something of [their] own” that bore little relationship to art from the Old World.⁷⁹ Of course, she was the same critic who elsewhere espoused a return to classical modes, a problematic move that makes it difficult to pinpoint what she felt were the actual criteria of this new American art. As previously noted, the opposition of nationalist sentiments with admiration for European classicism was a recurrent theme in American art criticism during this period, a testament perhaps to the newness of the “Americanness” discourse and the difficulties of establishing its parameters. Both elements of this commentary were intended to assert the uniqueness of modern art in the United States—one by claiming

⁷⁷ Stephen Bourgeois, quoted by Louise Ault in “Questions and Answers,” testimony used in preparation for an unidentified exhibition of Ault’s work, George Ault Papers, Archives of American Art.

⁷⁸ Rhodes, 30.

⁷⁹ Rourke, “American Art: A Possible Future,” 291.

that the country was continuing a tradition forsaken by Europe, the other by locating aesthetic precedents in the homegrown art of the past. If artists and critics such as Sheeler and Rourke were aware of the tension inherent in this model, it did not seem to cause them much consternation.⁸⁰ For his part, Ault moved freely between the two ends of the spectrum, simultaneously displaying a veneration for all things European as well as a fiercely “nativist” streak far removed from the high-minded ideals of classicism and its legacy.

Though Ault’s articulation of a modernist-folk idiom emerges most forcefully in the 1940s, the origins of this predilection can be found much earlier in his oeuvre. In this respect, the 1927 painting *Early America* (fig. 12) serves as a representative example. Painted while Ault was still living in New York City, the work depicts an idyllic landscape of country homes, barns, and a whitewashed church set amidst rolling green hills and farmland. Here, the artist displays the “indifference to surface realism” that Holger Cahill identified as a hallmark of the modern American aesthetic. The effect is particularly visible in Ault’s treatment of the buildings, where rather than delineate small details such as wooden boards or roof shingles, he reduces the structures to flat planes of color with minimal shading, creating a series of interlocking shapes punctuated only by the dark squares of windows and doors. The landscape itself receives a similarly minimal treatment, as trees and grass are painted using only a few shades of green applied to the canvas in broad expanses. And yet

⁸⁰ In his essay “Beginnings of ‘The American Wave’ and the Depression,” art historian Matthew Baigell characterizes these often-incompatible definitions of American artistic identity as a clash between “modernists,” who advocated for a complete break from all forms of European art, and “traditionalists,” who looked to European art history as a source for the modern American artist. See Matthew Baigell, “Beginnings of ‘The American Wave’ and the Depression,” in *Artist and Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 86-7, 89-90.

the effect here is not impressionistic or gestural. Instead, this vision of early America is precisely rendered using crisp black outlines, ruler straight edges, and minimal evidence of brushstrokes or layering of paint.

The graphic purity of *Early America* serves a double purpose that is in line with the interpretations of Cahill and Rourke. On the one hand, the painting's hard-edged blocks of color create a distinct sense of flatness and geometric abstraction, revealing the artist's familiarity with the modernist movement away from illusionism and towards a more conspicuously constructed, two-dimensional representational strategy. At the same time, the image's strong linearity and pared-down depiction recall the formal devices of folk paintings, an association that is further enhanced by Ault's choice of a traditional rural theme. In this work, Ault has drawn on the visual legacy of the folk tradition while passing it through the linear and hard-edged filter of the machine age aesthetic, creating an image that references the past in numerous respects while employing a representational strategy that is firmly situated in the early modernist moment in American art.

The parallels between Ault's work and folk art emerge clearly when compared to a painting such as *The White House* (fig. 13), created by an unknown and untrained Pennsylvania artist around 1855. This image is strongly representative of the themes and formal style that came to characterize folk art as it developed during the nineteenth century, and offers an effective comparison with *Early America* due to the similarity of the two works' subject matter. Both paintings depict white farmhouses set against a pastoral backdrop, though the home in the nineteenth-century example appears grander and more monumental than any of the structures in Ault's work.

Beyond this obvious thematic comparison, however, lie a number of important formal correspondences that illuminate the nature of Ault's references to the folk tradition. As in the 1927 painting, the eponymous white house of the earlier work is rendered using only a basic geometric vocabulary, its form suggested by a combination of black and white rectangles that constitute the building's walls and roof. The trees and vegetation surrounding the large home exhibit a similar paucity of detail, their forms filled in with a limited palette of green that finds a parallel in Ault's painting made seventy years later. Finally, both paintings share an unusual use of perspective that results in certain visual incongruities. In *Early America*, the clearest example of such distortion can be seen in the small white house that is partially obscured by a tree in the painting's middleground. The building's right wall resembles the upper half of a hexagon, but Ault's use of foreshortening does not conform to the painting's larger perspectival arrangement, making it appear as a curiously flat and disjointed form within the landscape. Similarly, the artist of *The White House* has painted the walkway and shrubbery in front of the residence at a precariously steep angle relative to the rest of the scene, a choice that allows for a clearer view of the garden but places this area of the painting at odds with the gradual recession into space seen in the background. For the artist working in the mid-nineteenth century, these disparities were likely the unintentional result of a lack of formal artistic training, with the painting's somewhat unrefined visuals serving as a reflection of its status as a naïve work. In contrast, *Early America* shows the formal elements of folk art transformed into a conscious style. The simplicity of shape and color seen in *The White House* is heightened and foregrounded through Ault's exacting and precise line, the misjudged

perspective selectively reintroduced as a nod to both historical American painting as well as to the deliberate distortions produced by contemporary artists.

Ault was probably not familiar with the specific folk painting under discussion here, but his choice of subject matter combined with his subtle play on the aesthetics of the untrained artist suggest that he was acquainted with this kind of work and intended for *Early America* to reference it. In 1931, Edith Halpert opened a gallery dedicated specifically to folk art on the second floor of the Downtown Gallery building, which would have made it easy for Ault to see paintings of this kind on a regular basis.⁸¹ In citing the formal and thematic language of naïve painting, Ault brings the “spare abstract” style of the nineteenth century into the present day, inserting it into a sophisticated dialogue about American art and its place within the modernist trajectory.

At the same time that *Early America* prefigures Ault’s later engagement with folk art and rural themes, it is also a harbinger of the metaphysical depictions of the American landscape that he would develop around the time of his move to Woodstock. Louise observes in her memoirs that her husband was painting “dream picture[s]” by at least the early 1930s. The work that she describes in detail, a *New England Landscape* from 1933 now housed in a private collection, was an imagined scene that may have been assembled from the artist’s childhood memories of drives through the New England countryside with his father.⁸² No matter the actual source material, Ault acknowledged that it did not depict a real place but was instead a

⁸¹ Press release, September 1931, in Downtown Gallery Records, Archives of American Art. Halpert named the new gallery The American Folk Art Gallery. Rather than present regular exhibitions, the gallery’s collection was open only by appointment to collectors and “students of American art.”

⁸² Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, 71.

construct, an ideal vision meant to be read as “New England” only in the broadest and most general sense.

Whether or not *Early America* was also one of these “dream pictures” cannot be determined with absolute certainty, but there are clues to suggest that this landscape, too, was one of Ault’s early forays into the world of recalled memories and dreams. The title of the work is the greatest piece of evidence in favor of this reading. Rather than pointing to a specific location for the small town in the painting, Ault indicates only that it is an early American scene, a choice that invokes a distinct sense of placelessness. Furthermore, the title serves as a temporal marker that situates the image somewhere in the early history of the United States, a time that Ault did not experience firsthand and would therefore have to recreate through his imagination. It is not difficult, therefore, to posit that this work is largely an invention, a somewhat vague evocation of a distant epoch that relies on its rustic theme and “neo-primitive” stylings to summon a bygone, idyllic past.

With its relatively uniform conjuration of time and place, *Early America* deviates slightly from the established techniques of the metaphysical school. Unlike de Chirico’s bewildering scenes, which enjoin a smattering of disparate objects from multiple historical periods, Ault’s image of the early United States locates itself in a determinable era, though the specific moment depicted remains unknown. Rather than invent a completely new world, Ault excavates one that is known to have existed but has since been lost to the progression of time. But this is not to say that the work abandons the tenets of metaphysical painting completely. On the contrary, its reliance on dreams and the imagination to construct fictive worlds represents the

continuing influence of the Italian movement, despite the ardently native content of the landscape. Furthermore, Ault's fascination with history and the "essence" of a particular time and place is in line with the metaphysical school's cultural program, which sought to uncover the origins and character of Italian civilization. Although it abandons the Italians' tendency towards multiplicity, the painting reflects an exploration of cultural symbols and a reliance on invention that is wholly in line with de Chirico's project. In this way, Ault formulates his own distinct adaptation of metaphysical ideology, providing an American reworking of his Italian source material that is ultimately more traditional and conservative in its approach.

If *Early America* depicts an environment that is recognizable and known, then the 1940 painting *The Plough and the Moon* (fig. 14) veers in precisely the opposite direction. It is in works such as this one—produced much later in his career, after leaving New York City—that Ault's landscapes come closest to emulating the otherworldly, ethereal scenes of his contemporaries in Italy. At the center of *The Plough and the Moon*, the painting's eponymous farm tool has furrowed deep into the dirt of a barren landscape. The earth is bathed in the ghostly light of the moon, which hangs high in the sky above, framed by a grouping of clouds. On the painting's left side, the crumbling ruin of what appears to be a factory rises up from the ground, its chimneys and arched portals cast into deep shadow. Ault's borrowings from de Chirico are particularly noticeable in this painting. The tall chimneys of the factory building recall a similar device that the Italian artist used in many of his canvases from the 1910s, such as *The Anxious Journey* (1913), *The Surprise* (1913), and *The Anguish of Departure* (1913) (figs. 15-17). In Ault's painting, the factory chimney is

combined with another one of de Chirico's favorite stock images—namely, the arcade. With its angled perspective and rapid recession into space, there can be little doubt that Ault's arcade is intended as an allusion to the metaphysical painter and his fondness for this form. But the American artist's acknowledgement of de Chirico does not stop at visual quotations. With its disquieting atmosphere and strange juxtapositions of objects, *The Plough and the Moon* hews closely to the ideal metaphysical setting, which was meant to be charged with an indecipherable significance. Ault's interest in imagined environments may have started much earlier in his career with works like *Early America*, but it was not until his arrival in Woodstock that he began to experiment with the fantastical and extraordinary elements of metaphysical painting in a sustained and consistent manner.

As one would expect, the strongly metaphysical character of *The Plough and the Moon* makes it much more ambiguous and difficult to interpret than an image such as *Early America*. The plough, abandoned in a desolate field, is a totem of an earlier agricultural history in which farmers worked the land with animals and their own physical strength, rather than machinery. In contrast, the factory implies a modernity that seems out of place in this otherwise rustic location, but it too has been left to crumble and decay. As with Ault's paintings of nudes, the combination of objects in this work undermines any clearly determinable ideological statement. The inclusion of the plough and factory building would suggest some commentary on the relationship between the agrarian past and industrialized present, but the derelict structure and inexplicable, displaced setting are curious enough to thwart a straightforward reading about the value of one historical era versus another. As with

so many works by the artists of the metaphysical school, the intention of *The Plough and the Moon* lies not in advancing a distinct position vis à vis modernity, but in fashioning an enigma for its own sake that draws attention to the metaphysical character of the objects depicted within it. In placing these signifiers of history into an alien and indecipherable world, Ault calls upon the viewer to approach them with a new eye and to recognize the latent associations that are contained within them. What emerges is a palpable aura of heightened meaning and an acknowledgement of the world's incomprehensibility that is in line with the Nietzschean experiments of de Chirico and his contemporaries.

The Plough and the Moon is one of the most frequently-cited examples of Ault's involvement with Surrealism. Susan Lubowsky includes the canvas among Ault's late works exhibiting a "Surrealist approach," and even Louise described it in similar language, noting that its "surreal architecture" contrasted with the "graceful form of the plow in the foreground."⁸³ But as I have argued earlier, Ault's engagement with a culturally-specific range of forms and objects is at odds with the Surrealist project, which was much more indiscriminate in its assemblages and concerned primarily with destabilizing the hegemony of national artistic traditions. *The Plough and the Moon* exhibits stylistic similarities to Surrealism with its enigmatic landscape and dissolving architecture, and Ault's use of imagined and dreamlike forms suggests a thematic and conceptual parallel with that movement. Yet these characteristics are equally evident in metaphysical painting, which proposed a fundamentally different approach to art history and its value in the present day that is far closer to Ault's own point of view.

⁸³ Lubowsky, 31; Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, 38.

The landscape that Ault has created here is undoubtedly imaginary, and the factory building recalls de Chirico's *Italitanità* as well as American industrialism, but the agrarian setting also invokes the pastoral surroundings of Ault's home in Woodstock, a distinct change of scenery from the metaphysical school's empty piazzas. The result of this shift in location is a discernible connotation of Americanness that circumscribes the possible meanings and interpretations of this work. The forms in the painting are less likely to read as citations from the metaphysical school, since the rural/industrial dichotomy seems especially suggestive of an American history and context. Whether or not the viewer recognizes its allusions to de Chirico, *The Plough and the Moon* is clearly invested in symbols of Western culture, both European and American, that have little to do with the Surrealists' ad hoc undermining of cultural hierarchies and Western notions of civilization. The metaphysical qualities that Ault channels in this work therefore transcend the visual to encompass de Chirico's ideology and his sense of purpose as an artist in the contemporary world. By combining an inscrutable stylistic vocabulary with a determined interest in the culture of his native country, the Italian artist offered a model for a modernist praxis that would be highly influential in Ault's later interpolations of American art, its history, and its landscapes.

Of all the landscapes that Ault produced during his time in Woodstock, *The Plough and the Moon* is perhaps most indebted to de Chirico's metaphysics, and consequently bears less resemblance to the actual environment in which Ault was working at the time of its creation. This interest in wholly imagined settings gradually disappeared from the artist's landscape paintings as the decade progressed.

Instead, he began to favor compositions that made direct reference to the Woodstock environment, albeit still imbued with a sense of metaphysical import. The 1943 oil painting *Old House, New Moon* (fig. 18) is indicative of this shift, demonstrating the way in which Ault combined real-life structures with fantastic, ideologically-loaded spaces. The painting shows a white, Victorian-era country home positioned directly behind a large, leafless black tree. Composed as a series of white and black planes with only the most essential details lightly sketched in, the house recalls the nineteenth century not only in its architectural style, but also in the rather naïve formal vocabulary that Ault has used to paint it. The house's windows are completely dark, suggesting a state of lifelessness and abandonment. A few evergreens and a small bush dot the landscape on the painting's right side, but otherwise the house stands alone in a large, empty field of grass.

Although the presence of the moon identifies *Old House, New Moon* as a nighttime scene, the sky is so brightly lit that the house casts a distinct shadow. Dark, flat clouds in vaguely anthropomorphic shapes frame the moon, tree, and house, creating an unsettling and ethereal atmosphere. This sense of disquiet is heightened by the cragged tree at the center of the canvas, along with the house's ghostly appearance and its placement within a strange, desolate plain. Alexander Nemerov underscores this eerie atmosphere in his analysis of the work, which he relates to the boom in horror movies during the war as well as to the proliferation of haunted house imagery that accompanied it.⁸⁴ The visual parallels between Ault's painting and the more popular images that Nemerov compares it to are certainly convincing, and he is right to highlight the painting's pronounced impression of horror and dread. But the

⁸⁴ Nemerov, 80-2.

origins of this composition lie as much in Woodstock and its traditional environment as they do in the visual legacy of scary movies, and it is this historicizing impulse that would emerge as one of the most important characteristics of Ault's late landscape oeuvre.

The white house with darkened windows that gives *Old House, New Moon* its name may look like something out of a ghost story, but it was in fact an actual residence located near Ault's home in Woodstock. Louise notes that upon seeing it, her husband exclaimed: "It's wonderful! I'd like to buy it and move it to a new location. I'd paint it pink and blue."⁸⁵ George's statement, while obviously meant in jest, is helpful in revealing his underlying intentions for the painting. The act of moving the house to a new location and repainting it in garish colors would, in a sense, be the equivalent of a metaphysical gesture enacted in the real world. No longer situated in its original context, the house would appear out of place and bizarrely manipulated, an act of reconfiguration that would transform an everyday structure into one of uncanny idiosyncrasy. Ault clearly lacked the means to carry out such a scheme, but his painting of the home serves as a suitable substitute for this audacious plan. Though he declined to repaint the building in pink and blue, Ault used *Old House, New Moon* as an opportunity to resituate the Victorian structure into his own imagined setting. In a description of this work written sometime after its completion, Louise remarked that "in the painting he used only the house and tree as it was, inventing the environment."⁸⁶ The work is therefore a combination of the real

⁸⁵ Louise Ault, "Questions and Answers."

⁸⁶ Ibid.

and the fictional, with Ault's unnerving landscape giving the home an air of menace that it may or may not have had in real life.⁸⁷

Ault's process of re-presentation in *Old House, New Moon* is firmly entrenched in the methodology of the metaphysical painter. His choice of a Victorian-era home as the subject for this canvas recalls the Italian movement's delight in the relics of departed eras. Divorced from its normal surroundings and associations, the house takes on a palpable sense of the macabre that is solely the artist's creation, a reinterpretation of an everyday landmark that recalls de Chirico's unexpected appropriations of iconic Italian structures. At the same time, this work signals new directions in Ault's approach to the Woodstock landscape that distinguish it from his previous forays into the metaphysical such as *The Plough and the Moon*. The history that Ault invokes here is that of the rural American past, not the classical or European one referenced elsewhere in his work. The confounding references to de Chirico such as arcades and chimneys have been stripped away, leaving a more contained depiction of nineteenth-century American architecture that simultaneously recalls the celebrated aesthetic of folk art. And where *The Plough and the Moon* was a complete invention having no basis in any real physical setting, the house and tree in *Old House, New Moon* are known to have existed somewhere in the area around

⁸⁷ Ault's creation of a melancholic, imagined environment in this work is reminiscent of American artist Edward Hopper, who was painting at the same time and was also interested in the possibilities for enigma proposed by Surrealism (for more on Hopper's relationship to Surrealism, see Gail Levin, "Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*, Surrealism, and the War," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 180-195, 200. But the function of Hopper's disquieting scenes was often a commentary on the isolation and dejectedness of modern life, particularly in the urban environment (Matthew Baigell, "The Silent Witness of Edward Hopper," in *Artist and Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 49-52). In this way, his work desires to express a more identifiable and straightforward position in regards to modernity than that of either Ault or de Chirico, and lacks the nostalgic and metaphysical impulses that characterized the latter artists' explorations of culture and its origins.

Ault's cabin. The result of this new interest in existing architecture is an increasingly specific and temporally situated vision of a metaphysical Catskill environment. Here a single structure, chosen both for its aesthetic and its history, is placed into an otherworldly context in order to magnify and enhance its resonance as a cultural form. As the 1940s progressed, Ault would become increasingly fascinated by the particular history of Woodstock and its inhabitants, making use of his metaphysical vocabulary to create worlds that are imagined yet firmly located within a distinct historical milieu.

The shift in Ault's work towards fully historicized landscapes is best embodied in his 1946 oil painting *Festus Yayple and His Oxen* (fig. 19). It is here that Ault makes the clearest use of metaphysical techniques to formulate his own specific recreation of the American past, a move that is deeply indebted to de Chirico yet divorced from the Italian artist's interest in deliberate confusion and mystery. The subject of the painting is the Woodstock oxen trader Festus Yayple, a personal friend of Ault's and a fixture in the Catskill community who died some time before the work was begun.⁸⁸ Inserted into the center of a winter landscape, Festus is shown with his team of oxen transporting a barrel on a sled. The vista is framed by a rocky ridge that sweeps across the canvas in a bowl-like shape, creating a *repoussoir* effect that draws the viewer's eyes to the small figures in the snow and the mountainous topography behind them. Ault has painted the scene in large, flat swaths of grays and whites, and Festus and his oxen are so simplified in appearance that they almost resemble cutouts. The painting's rudimentary visual style is a nod to the aesthetics of nineteenth-century folk landscapes couched in the language of abstraction, an approach that

⁸⁸ Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, 140.

Louise characterized as “neo-primitive.”⁸⁹ But Ault’s references to Woodstock’s agrarian history do not end with his portrayal of a former town inhabitant or his use of a folk art-derived formal language. Rather, the entire landscape is intended as an imaginative recreation of a dissipated world, one to which Ault felt increasingly drawn as the decade progressed.

Louise Ault devotes an entire paragraph to *Festus Yayple and His Oxen* in her memoirs, writing that the work:

combined the immediate environment and imagination. This landscape developed as a result of winter walks along the Woodstock Ridge road, in combination with his nostalgia for the early America he had learned of from his mother’s lips, as well as from the stories he encouraged and so much relished from Catskill folk. The artist had stood on the edge of the ridge and looked down; there he saw a Catskill landscape not of his day. He saw and painted the agrarian Catskills of the time of his old friend, the deceased oxen trader.⁹⁰

This description offers a rich summation of the painting’s conception and intended meaning. Although the landscape is based on an actual view that Ault witnessed from the Woodstock Ridge, it is also an imaginary recreation of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Catskills in which Festus Yayple lived, a community that had long since succumbed to the vicissitudes of time and the town’s rapidly changing demographic. The unusual name Festus Yayple, although attributed to an actual Woodstock resident and friend of Ault’s, carries a charge of fantasy and whimsy that hints at the painting’s use of imagined and fictional imagery. This conspicuously bizarre, unreal quality is best embodied in the shape of the ridge that encloses the

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

scenery. It is unlikely that the view from this location was as impeccably framed as it appears in Ault's painting, and the form of the outcrop suggests the artificiality of a stage setting.⁹¹ Other elements in the painting allude to the avant-garde precedents of European modernism. The stunted, leafless trees in the foreground recall the barren landscapes of surrealist artist Salvador Dalí, while the undulating, clearly delineated blocks of color in the rocky cliffs, clouds, and lake go beyond a mere rehashing of the folk aesthetic to reach a new level of hard-edged, nearly abstract realism. What at first glance appears to be a relatively straightforward depiction of Woodstock scenery is therefore revealed to be far more complicated, employing the tactics of modernism to effect a new pictorial strategy that merges the real and the imaginary in both content and formal style.

But as Louise notes in her memoir, this painting is also permeated by a strong sense of nostalgia, a fascination with America's rural past that grew from Ault's interactions with his mother, who was raised in a Midwestern pioneer family, as well as with Woodstock's older, more permanent residents.⁹² The painting can therefore be read as an idyllic and romanticized vision of a Woodstock that Ault knew only from the recollections of people like Festus Yapple, an era that he did not witness directly but that nevertheless elicited his deep admiration and respect. In his recreation of the town's pastoral history, Ault also refers to his contemporaries' fascination with folk themes and styles. If the best American art was to look backwards towards the formal and thematic precedents of the naïve tradition,

⁹¹ Nemerov, 111.

⁹² Louise Ault, "Questions and Answers."

paintings such as *Festus Yayple and His Oxen* are Ault's personal claim to a piece of this "usable past."

By 1946, Ault had taken the metaphysical precedent established in Italy and subsumed it into an artistic methodology that was uniquely his own. The vestiges of de Chirico that remain in *Festus Yayple and His Oxen* can be seen most clearly in the painting's reliance on imaginary scenery. Like Ault's earlier experiments with a metaphysical landscape style, this work is a fundamentally chimeric view that recalls the perfected imagery of a dream or fantasy. But Ault has been careful here to draw on elements of the Woodstock Ridge as it actually looked, so that his inventions are masked behind a veil of authenticity and verisimilitude. Where *Old House, New Moon* took a recognizable landmark and placed it within a mystical environment that was clearly fictive, *Festus Yayple* is close enough in appearance to the real-life countryside that it is possible to read it as a straightforward depiction of the area's natural environment. All that remains of his earlier landscape views and their charged, mysterious aura is the dark grey band of clouds that hang low in the sky, but any sense of drama that they impart has been significantly attenuated by the painting's otherwise quaint, picturesque subject matter.

In addition to its use of dream imagery, *Festus Yayple and His Oxen* recalls metaphysical ideology by advocating for a distinctly national cultural legacy, rather than for the destabilization of tradition seen in Surrealist art. But though it exhibits a high esteem for American history and culture in a manner that mimics de Chirico's fascination with *Italianità*, this painting is not the disparate mash-up of epochs that would have interested the artists of the metaphysical school. Instead, it is an

adaptation of the Italian movement's processes that creates a cohesive vision of a single, recognizable moment in time, one that conforms to Ault's vision of rural life as related to him by his friends in Woodstock. Those aspects of the town's past that Ault cannot see himself are summoned from his imagination, with the result that his painting is imbued with a strong sense of place and historical specificity. Ultimately, the work celebrates the rural existence and its attendant communion with nature that Ault idolized in the Woodstock of the past, a lifestyle that he hoped to replicate with Louise in the couple's rustic cabin. For these reasons, *Festus Yayple and His Oxen* represents a culmination of Ault's metaphysical vision of the Catskills, one in which de Chirico's dreamlike visual language is recruited for a project that is unabashedly nostalgic and committed to recreating a particular moment in American history.

Ault's interest in reimagining nineteenth-century Woodstock was timely, for a number of American artists were making similarly nostalgic paintings during the 1930s and 40s. Prompted in large part by the hardships of the Great Depression, these artists took an isolationist turn towards the scenery and history of the United States' provincial, rural interior, which they saw as a more authentic source of inspiration than anything that came from Europe.⁹³ The most well-known manifestation of this national boosterism in the visual arts was the regionalist movement, helmed by artists such as Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry. Ault's work is perhaps closest in spirit to Wood's, who lived almost his entire life in Iowa and drew from the state's landscape and inhabitants just as Ault did in Woodstock. Inspired by the nativist sentiments of Iowan writers and scholars

⁹³ Alfred Haworth Jones, "The Search for a Usable Past in the New Deal Era," *American Quarterly* 23, no. 5 (December, 1971): 718.

such as Jay Sigmund and Ruth Suckow, Wood was persuaded to abandon his early interest in French painting styles and focus instead on the local traditions of his birthplace. In works such as *Arbor Day* from 1932 (fig. 20), for example, Wood conjures an idyllic, historically-grounded vision of Iowa's past that is far from the dust bowls and other harsh realities of American farm life in the 1930s. In this instance, the schoolhouse and tree-planting at the painting's center were based on an actual building and event that took place near Wood's hometown of Cedar Rapids in the 1890s.⁹⁴ Like Ault, Wood also alludes to modernist aesthetics in his work, taking the sparse visual language of the folk tradition and distilling it even further into large geometric planes of color, a tactic that is particularly evident in *Arbor Day*'s rolling hills and faceless schoolchildren. Ault's late landscapes therefore exhibit a distinct correspondence with Wood's nostalgia-tinged images of Iowa life, an unusual parallel considering Ault's relationship to the urban, machine age aesthetic of precisionism and his engagement with the European avant-garde.

Despite the similarities between these two artists, Ault's reverence for de Chirico and metaphysical painting does represent a significant departure from regionalist ideology, not least because it signified a connection to Europe that artists like Wood would have shunned.⁹⁵ Beyond the obvious tension between Old World and New, the regionalists were not interested in the abstract, Nietzschean notions of hidden reality or the indescribable, metaphysical sources of culture that motivated

⁹⁴ Wanda M. Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 25-6, 104.

⁹⁵ Wanda Corn notes in her catalogue essay on Wood that the artist studied the work of Flemish Old Masters, providing him with a link to Europe that is not often recognized (*Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*, 28-9). However, this interest is still at odds with Ault's more modernist leanings, which were strongly discouraged by proponents of the regionalist style.

even Ault's most hidebound depictions of Catskill life. Instead, their work was more straightforwardly topical, concerned with making familiar renderings of American life in an easily accessible visual language.⁹⁶ Although motivated by a similarly nostalgic quest for rural authenticity, Ault's more cosmopolitan leanings took his work in a different direction from that of Wood and his compatriots. Once again, Ault's combination of influences kept him at a distance from larger trends in the history of American art, a move that has made it all the more difficult to insert his work into a narrative of this period.

Like his images of the female nude, Ault's Woodstock landscapes demonstrate a respect for metaphysical ideology while simultaneously situating the movement in an American context. These late paintings reflect the same search for cultural meaning found in de Chirico's explorations of *Italianità*, but the viewer is now far from Italy and its classical past. Instead, Ault creates a fictional version of the United States as it might have appeared in the nineteenth century, a world that he could not have known but is able to recreate through secondhand recollections and nostalgic imaginings. If the metaphysical school was a somewhat conservative response to Surrealism's radical cultural critique and its attack on Western norms, Ault's landscapes are an even more traditional embodiment of the Italians' *rappel à l'ordre*. Though Ault's interest in enigma and the roots of civilization remain visible until the end of his career, the bizarre, inexplicable juxtapositions of historical symbols that defined de Chirico's metaphysical environments largely disappear, replaced with a still-imagined world that evinces a longing for a specific period in

⁹⁶ Karal Ann Marling, "A Note on New Deal Iconography: Futurology and the Historical Myth," *Prospects* 4 (1979): 438.

Woodstock's past. With their delight in the symbols and formal language of folk art, these works also situate Ault within a critical discourse around early American art history that ran parallel to his reverence for classicism. If the nude figure in Ault's work represents American art as a successor to Europe, his paintings of Woodstock are a celebration of what is indigenous in his practice and a return to a source that is truly local in origin.

Conclusion

In 1947, Ault produced the oil painting *Universal Symphony* (fig. 21), one of his last completed works before his accidental death by drowning the following year in Woodstock's Sawkill Creek.⁹⁷ The painting shows a barren landscape filled with strange, anthropomorphic shapes that recall the work of Surrealist artists such as Salvador Dalí. Ault's favorite clouds have taken on a graphic, cartoonish quality, the yellow orb of the sun casting sharply outlined shadows onto the earth below. In contrast to the foreground's desert-like setting, the background contains what appear to be large glaciers or mountains set amid a placid sea. What is most striking and unfamiliar about this work, however, is the large, multicolored form at its center. Impossible to identify as any recognizable object, the amoeba-like shape undulates with vibrant yellows and blues and folds back on itself with no apparent pattern or logic. The overall impression is one of pure fantasy, an environment that has no bearing or relationship to any part of the physical world.

A work like *Universal Symphony* is deserving of the Surrealist designation that is often erroneously applied to Ault's paintings. Suggesting an origin solely in the artist's imagination that parallels the Surrealists' investigations into the workings of the unconscious, the painting declines to engage in the valorization of a national artistic tradition, or to ruminate on the resonance of specific cultural forms. Here, Ault's metaphysical tendencies have been sacrificed to enigma for its own sake. But this painting is an anomaly in his corpus, suggesting a turn his work might have taken

⁹⁷ Nemerov, 133.

had it not been for his premature demise. What Ault has left us with instead are paintings that exhibit a strong interest in history and an attachment to a variety of artistic lineages, positioning themselves at the nexus of classicism and modernity, and folk art and abstraction.

Consider a similar desert image such as *The Plough and the Moon*. Though its undulating landscape mirrors the scenery in *Universal Symphony*, its arrangement of objects and symbols suggests a fascination with the opposing spheres of agriculture and industry, calling attention to the ideological connotations of everyday objects and their place within the American visual environment in a manner that has no equivalent in the later work. *Memories of the Coast of France* offers another point of comparison, its anthropometric rock formations and gently rippling seascape finding their counterparts in *Universal Symphony*'s tree-like protrusions and calm body of water. But for all its efforts to mystify and confuse, *Memories* remains situated both temporally and physically in the artist's childhood, and its solitary nude creates a complex statement about the tenuous future of Western art. Such an inquiry into the value of artistic tradition is absent from the 1947 painting, replaced with formal experiments in surreal abstraction and vague hints of the subconscious and its machinations. The historiographic currents that suffused Ault's previous paintings—their appraisal of American art as both an heir to the past and a progenitor of modernism's future—have been summarily jettisoned, leaving an image that is surreal both in its content and in its conceptual detachment from Ault's earlier work.

Ultimately, *Universal Symphony* is remarkable primarily for what Ault has chosen not to depict, its startling deviations from his usual formula serving as a foil to

the rest of the his late oeuvre. In comparing this painting to Ault's other images of nudes and landscapes, we are reminded of the way in which his work takes a palpable delight in critical notions of artistic heritage and the creation of an American pictorial sensibility. Thus his art remains intimately tied to the metaphysical project and its attendant interest in cultural signification and hierarchies, asserting the primacy and progressiveness of American art as well as the rich array of source materials from which it drew.

In his congruence with de Chirico and the metaphysical school, Ault carved a distinctive and solitary niche for himself within the history of American painting in the first half of the twentieth century. While they bear formal and thematic resemblances to precisionist works by artists like Sheeler and Demuth, Ault's paintings demonstrate a proclivity for the uncanny and extraordinary that marks a decisive departure from the clinical realism of his contemporaries. These fantastical gestures highlight Ault's unselfconscious reverence for European modernism at a time when such interests remained unpopular for a large segment of the American art community. At the same time, his late landscapes show a nostalgic commitment to the American past that is in line with much of the artistic discourse of this period, although the ideological origins of these paintings lie in Italian metaphysics rather than the overt nationalism of the regionalists. The de Chirico-inspired exploration of American culture that emerges in Ault's nudes and landscapes remains an oddity, a visual program that can be characterized as neither reactionary nor wholly avant-garde.

Beyond the thorny issues of European influence and progressivism, Ault's late paintings complicate the history of "Surrealism" and its influence in the United States before the rise of the New York School. Though his work cannot be made to represent a larger group of artists or serve in the identification of a new movement or style, it nevertheless stands as testimony to a vein of imagery that does not conform to the social activism of the "magic realists" or the automatic, reflexive gestures of Abstract Expressionism. Rather than look towards Surrealism as the artists of those movements did, Ault drew on the values of the metaphysical school to formulate his own particular artistic methodology. His paintings suggest that there may be more to uncover about American artists' affinities with Surrealism and the metaphysical school than has previously been acknowledged, and that there exist patterns of borrowing during this period that do not fit within the few histories currently written on the subject. In his formulation of a personal and nostalgic world in which to retreat and make his art, Ault took the conceptual underpinnings of de Chirico and adapted them to the exigencies of his American situation. The result is a body of images that speaks to the self-fashioning of artists in the United States at this time, while simultaneously remaining cognizant of the visual developments and critical dialogues that were taking place abroad.

Illustrations

Illustrations have been redacted from this version of the thesis.

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