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Artists' Panel

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# Artists' Panel

*Joel Meyerowitz, photographer*  
*George Segal, sculptor*  
*William Bailey, painter*  
*Moderator: Gail Levin*

**Joel Meyerowitz:** It came as a surprise to me when I was asked to appear on this panel. I wondered what the connection might be between my work as a photographer and Edward Hopper's, beyond the superficial one of time spent on Cape Cod. The more I thought about it, the more I saw how penetrating was his presence in my early education. I remembered when I worked as a commercial art director in the sixties, my lunch hour visits to the Whitney Museum, how I'd walk through the lobby of the Modern to the quiet dark chamber that was the entrance to the Whitney, climb the stairs, and always know that a Hopper or a Cornell would be on view. Sometimes whole rooms full of them, or so my memory tells me. That's how strong the impression was. I remember that Hopper could get a hold on me, and trancelike, like some of the people in the paintings, I stood there caught in a moment that seemed to go on forever. There was always something fascinating and mysterious and meaningful and ordinary in his work. I learned that there was power to be found in the most ordinary things if you knew how to look at them. The way to look at them, Hopper was showing me, was hard: "Look to the point of fascination," he seemed to say, "don't turn away. Trust that if you stand long enough to lose yourself, you'll see something. And if you learn how to wait, things like beds and windows and cornerstones and places like automats and offices and motel rooms would slowly seep into your mind and acquire a gravity, a significance that could be measured with paint and feeling."

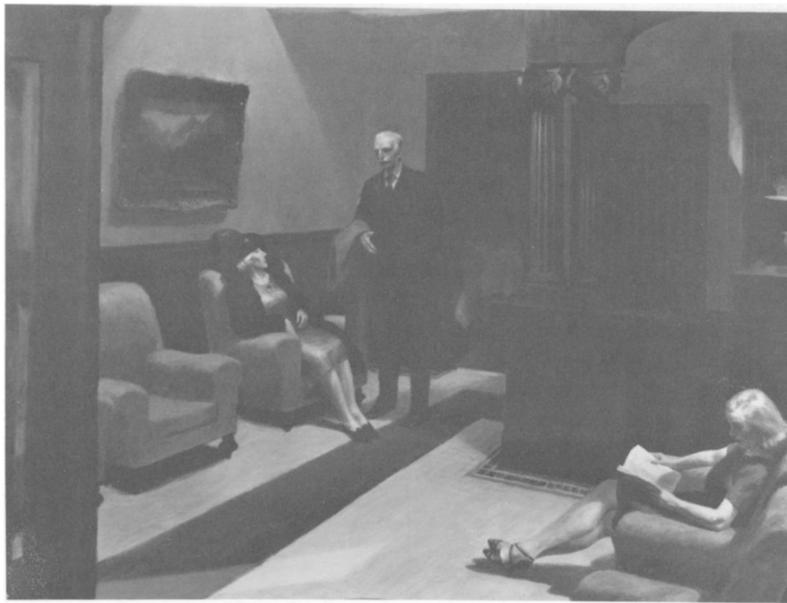
It seems to me that Hopper was a man who liked to take his time. Running through

all his paintings was the quality of time and of waiting: people in their rooms, houses in their light, the endurance of things, the lengthening of the moment. Right there is where he interests me, the response to the moment. It seems to me that it's the one place where a photographer and a painter like Hopper will feel something similar, where two different measures of time are used. As a photographer, my passion has always been for chaos and chance, for the instantaneous, for life on the streets, and for ordinary things. Also for the absurd and the disappearing, things that don't hold still. The moment that I work in is that intense fraction of a second when you feel yourself most clearly and when what you are looking at makes a new kind of sense. But with photography, unlike painting, there is no going back. The moment is one of a kind, whereas for Hopper, the moment could be carried off and be expanded upon day after day for as long as it gave him pleasure. It's thrilling to think of him sitting in front of a painting and waiting until he was charged with feeling and could slip back into the moment: the pleasure in a solitary trip to a place of feeling, to sunlight dazzling a wall, or the poignancy of a room looking out onto the city, or dusk. Those pictures strike us with the force of his transport—the daily flight back to the source and the effort to bring up to intensity that experience and thereby its truth. In recent years, I have begun to work with an old-fashioned view camera. Time moves more slowly through that machine, and more often now I find myself around the most unlikely subjects: a row of bungalows by the sea, the white bone of a building against the sky. And I'm surprised by how often light

stops me and by the significance it lends to familiar things. I feel closer in temperament now to the duration of Hopper's mind, and when I'm watchful I see myself in other things. I remember that Hopper was once asked what he was after, and he explained, "I'm after ME."

**George Segal:** Very poetic, but really I appreciate the tenderness of the feeling. I understand that everyone has been subjected to art-historian talk all day, and we thought, the four of us here, it might be refreshing if we spoke a bit more personally and more subjectively about exactly how we felt about Hopper. I've been personally embattled by his work because of statements that people like Rothko made. I never met Hopper in my life. At one point Rothko said of my work—and it's been printed over and over again—"It looks like a walk-in Hopper." I was furious when Rothko said that, and when Robert Pincus-Witten wrote an article to that effect, I was furious with Robert also; and yet both Rothko and Pincus-Witten, I discovered, were trying to be extremely kind to me. I had my own growing uncertainty about my own work, I suppose, at that moment. And I didn't have then the generosity to admit several things.

What I think is true of New York artists of my generation and the past couple of generations has been their ambiguous relationship to the School of Paris. Hopper went to Paris. He took an awfully long time to develop, and I've always admired his honesty and his sense of personal struggle. He would not retreat from a straightforward, foursquare looking at the visual world in front of him. And yet, he obviously was staggered, overwhelmed



**Fig. 1**

**Fig. 1** Hopper, *Hotel Lobby*, 1943, oil on canvas, 32½ x 40¾". Indianapolis Museum of Art, William Ray Adams Memorial Collection.

**Fig. 2** Hopper, *Study for Hotel Lobby*, 1943, conté, 8½ x 11". New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper.



**Fig. 2**

by the extraordinary discoveries and accomplishment and achievements of the School of Paris. He was painting like Matisse. He was painting like Derain. He was painting thick, soft, brushy brushstrokes, using simplified color, perceiving scenes that were approaching abstraction. I had memories of Matisse paintings of Notre Dame—you know, blue or green with a couple of black marks—that were incredibly far superior to any of those tentative, hesitant, unrealized French paintings that Hopper was doing. And I was praying for him. Why was he taking so long? Then the first time I went to Paris, in 1963, I was invited to an outdoor café, and these excited little Frenchmen pushed their faces up as close to me as this microphone, and they were all very agitated talking at me. I

looked around and every inch of the tables was decorated with an intricate design. I found myself pushing the Parisians away at arm's length. I couldn't stand that French space, and then I began to get a small glimmer into what it was about Hopper that he wouldn't retreat from. I was wondering why it was taking him so long. It was not until he came back to America that he was at home with the light, he was at home with the architecture, he was at home with the space, I feel. And I think that his loneliness, angst, and existentialism have probably been overstressed. I think that he felt comfortable moving in that kind of space.

Then, other things began to strike me. It would have been so easy for Hopper to have made a neat abstraction. He was obviously bright, obviously entranced with

anything he wanted in his craft; yet he chose to remain stumbling somehow, and he chose not to use decorative solutions. So again, his honesty really struck me. I suppose that—when was it?—in the twenties and thirties he began to come to himself in his painting. And suddenly what seems to be a naturalistic scene undergoes a series of subtle changes, and the forms that he sees are somehow reorganized into blocks of pictorial architecture. Now he, I think, stumbled on his own honest way of making an abstraction.

The reason I admire him so much is that he never stopped looking at the real world—with all the danger of being a naturalistic illustrator. Now, there's a difference being an illustrator (and he made his living that way and it must have caused him untold private agony). But, for him to use the real stuff of the world and somehow—not suddenly but painstakingly, painfully, slowly—figure out how to stack the elements into a heap that began talking very tellingly of his own deepest inner feelings, he had to make some kind of marriage between what he could see outside with his eyes, touch with his hands, and the feelings that were going on inside. Now, I think that's as simply as I can say what I think art is about. Take, for example, the drawing for *Hotel Lobby* and the painting (**Figs. 1 and 2**). The drawing he obviously did in his notebook while standing in a hotel lobby. There's an entire series of subtle shifts, changes, that I think are equivalent to all the shifts and changes that go on in the most sophisticated Cubist painting by Picasso or Braque, shifts and changes that Hopper made in order to arrive at an architecture and internal state of mind, which I like enormously.

**William Bailey:** The first Edward Hopper painting that I remember seeing is called *Light Battery at Gettysburg* (**Fig. 3**). It was done in 1940 or at least dated in '40, and I saw it at a show at the Nelson Gallery in Kansas City, I think it was in the spring of 1949. I know it was in my first or second year of art school. It was a distressing experience for me. I didn't like the painting at all, I had never heard of Edward Hopper, and what was remarkable about the painting for me was that it was in an exhibition of contemporary painting at the Nelson Gallery. It seemed terribly clumsy and boring, and yet it made an uncommonly strong impression on me. Because I remembered the image of that painting, I remembered the name Edward Hopper for some time. As I studied painting, gradually Hopper became more and more a presence in my consciousness, that is, through an occa-

sional painting, a reproduction. I still don't think that that is a great Hopper, but it has many of the virtues of Hopper. One of the things that I disliked about the painting or, I should say, rather that I couldn't see in the painting was that it possessed few of the conventional virtues of the time, that is, there seemed to be no strong social theme. The drama of the *Light Battery* didn't seem to be particularly important. It was a sunny day and there were these soldiers in blue suits with cannons, woods behind, and houses next to the road. There was nothing about the brushwork, there was nothing about the composition that seemed to me arresting. It was very clear though, it was very simple, it was very homely, and it stuck with me. Years later when I was studying with Joseph Albers, I remember a fellow student confessed his admiration for Hopper to Albers, and Albers said, "Ah, that's very strange for someone as young as you. I thought only the old ones liked him."

Well, I've been looking at Hopper now for over thirty years. I never met him, and yet I feel that I have through paintings. I can't say that I know what the paintings are about. The paintings remain a mystery to me. The character of the man that I see through the paintings becomes gradually clearer, but that's not the subject of the talk. Since the opening of this exhibition, I've read any number of articles dealing with those qualities that can be named that one finds in Hopper. I can't find fault with them for I too see them in the paintings: loneliness, alienation, urban life, abstraction, light, American light, et cetera, et cetera. Yet, I find those things inadequate, and they seem somehow to trivialize and sentimentalize an artist's struggle and the authenticity of the work.

I want for just a little while to dwell on one painting which is called *Nighthawks* (Pl. 11). I started rewriting this talk last night with a case of nerves, and so I got out Gail's book and I was looking at the reproduction of *Nighthawks*. I wrote on and on and on and on about all the things I saw in the painting, and then this morning I came and looked at the painting again. It's a painting I've seen many times now, and I saw that just about a third of what I had written occurred only in the reproduction and wasn't in the painting. So much for reproductions and slides and so on. This painting is dated 1942. What I'm going to try to do very briefly is very hard to do without being misunderstood. I'm going to try to talk about this from a painter's standpoint, that is to say, a painter retracing another painter. I think that one must never take the painting of a painting for granted, and I think too many people do. The fact is that a painting



Fig. 3

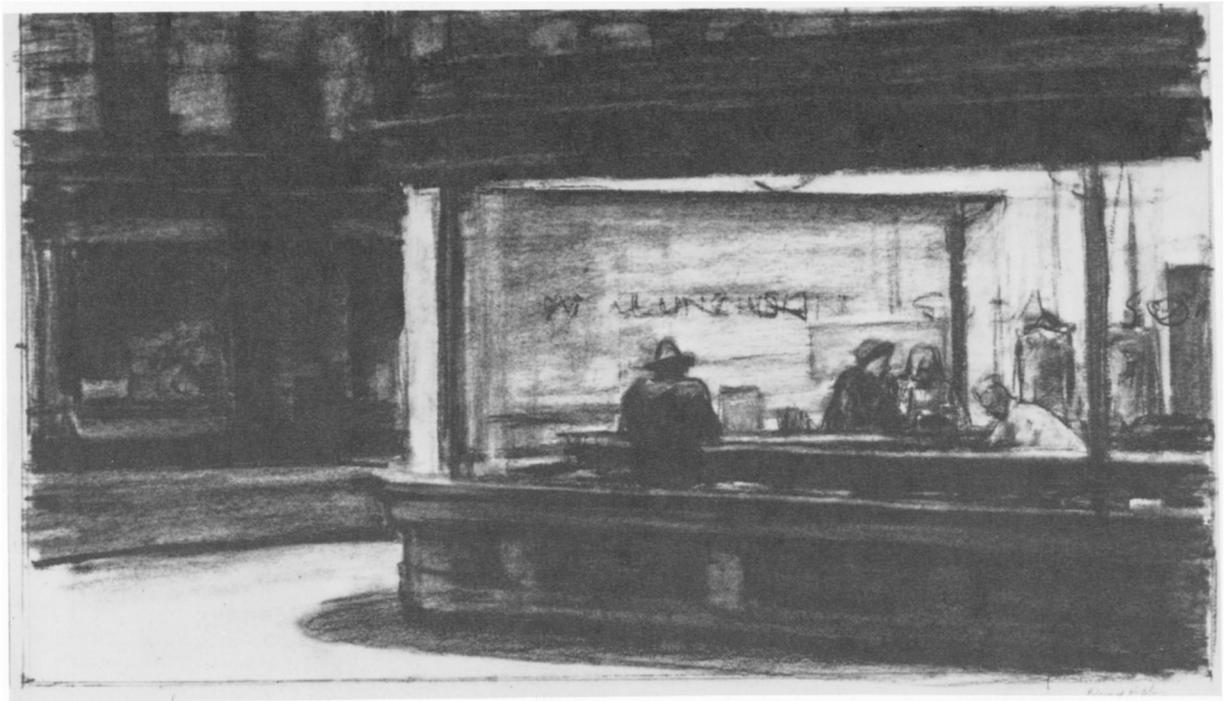
is after all a fabrication, something done on a flat piece of cloth with hairy sticks and colored mud. This painting I see first as a monumental structure. I see this great, dark ledge which begins to frame that smaller—what seems to be whitish but is very greenish ochre—interior and changes between the wall plane at the top, the ceiling plane of the room. With those planes juxtaposed with those given weights, those given weights make us begin to see the whole light through the painting. The source of the light is that white plane or that greenish ochre plane. This wedge of the outside of the restaurant or the lunch stand operates as a triangle penetrating on a horizontal plane. It's projected into space. Inside is the triangle of the lunch counter; again a shape that's drawn, painted to project into a space to give off a particular light is projected within that frame. We find the weight of that reddish burnt sienna counter reflected again, echoed again in that plane of the house, the building across the street. What appears white here in the slide is actually a more greenish or grayish color.

The structure of the painting, it seems to me, holds another sort of drama, but a drama that is required to exist within a very, very particular moment—the sort of thing that Joel suggested in his talk. It's a moment of passing, it's a moment when we see but don't enter. There are four figures inside. The counterman—I'd like for you to see the shape of the counterman in relation to the shape of that light, that light shape, light giving shape. The thrust is the same. The two figures that are sitting against the darkened window, the couple—the couple are related because they are together. They are related because they are inside the space; they are related somewhat to the plane behind them. The other figure works with the forward plane. What's the line? What's the risk here? I've been talking fairly

formally about the painting. But the painting isn't about those planes. Those planes are to get us someplace. They are part of the drama of the painting, the expressive forces that are operating in the painting. It seems to me that they hold that moment, keep the painting from falling away into anecdote—for example, the story of the counterman and the two figures and the lonely figure on the other side of the counter.

There is an extraordinary degree of manipulation, of restraint. This flows all the way through the painting. Those figures are particularized to a degree that one doesn't find them particularized in the drawing. Let's look at the drawing quickly (Fig. 4). In the drawing we have sort of a scene. There is a landscape and there are some figures sort of in a place. It has none of the snap, none of the sharpness, none of the realized quality of moment that I find in the painting. In the painting there is suddenly a psychological relationship set up. It's almost like life in the sense that one can pass the painting, one can pass the situation, and not know the drama, not know that particular story. You know that there is a story but you don't know what the story is. It seems to me that Hopper is able to suspend that area of ambiguity in almost all of his paintings—an area of ambiguity that is not sought, is not fudged, but is clearly, clearly ambiguous. Every part of the painting is clearly articulated. If you look at the rectangles in the center of the painting and if you look at those ground-floor windows at the left, you see the attention, the same intensity when he's working with two colors that are very close in the lower key as when he's working with extreme contrasts. There's something about that attitude that results in a quality that simply has to remain a mystery to me. It's what a painter does when he says "it's right" or "it's not right." Where is the truth of this thing? I

Fig. 3 Hopper, *Light Battery* at Gettysburg, 1940, oil on canvas, 18 x 27". Kansas City, Mo., Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Gift of the Friends of Art.



**Fig. 4** Hopper, *Study for Nighthawks, 1942, conté, 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 14"*. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Peter R. Blum.

think Hopper sought a truth and that truth had an abstract quality, but the abstract quality could only be seen through a living situation. There's a quote from Wallace Stevens, which I'll do freehand for I don't have the exact quote. Stevens said in a letter, "I want my work to exist on an abstract plane, but in order to do this I may have to begin by talking about the weather." I have a feeling that that applies to Hopper as well.

**Gail Levin:** Joel Meyerowitz, in your own recent exhibition *Cape Light*, you capture the intense quality of sunlight that animates the Cape Cod landscape. Do you view Hopper's use of light in a landscape as naturalistic? And what about his light in city scenes and interiors?

**JM:** I think I understand what you mean by naturalistic. I don't think I view his work, his life, as naturalistic. It seems to me to be an emphatic life, a theatrical life, a life that appeals to a sense of abstraction, and a life that renders form with the kind of mystery and observation that he viewed everything with. It seems to me to be a focus in his work. Everything had the same intensity—whether it was a hand bouncing a cigarette or it was a volume of light cascading down a wall. His focus is overall in a painting. There is never a letup. And that kind of obsessive passionate viewing of things, that soaking them up that gives him feelings, adds mystery, meaning to all of those works.

**GL:** You deal with what's there. Somehow you just left it. But it's there. I wonder if you felt Hopper dealt with what was there.

**JM:** I think he does both. I have to deal with what is there because of the materials and the medium that I use. So when I see something, if I'm absorbed into it, I can only react by making a picture of it. Hopper could probably walk down the same road and at some given point turn and say, "That's beautiful," and walk on, and maybe if he did that for ten days in a row, he'd build a kind of appetite for that subject and he could transform that into anything he wanted. I understand that he manipulated these images. It wasn't always drawn from nature but it was felt so deeply each time. There are times I wish that in photography I had that access to the invention and imagination, but I accept it as it is.

**GL:** William Bailey, can you comment on Hopper's use of light?

**WB:** I see it as being the light that is the structure of the painting. I don't think light renders in Hopper. It's a positive element. Things are built out of light. One of the problems when you talk about reality in relationship to photography is that there is a photographic reality that has to do with the way the camera receives light on a sensitized film. An artist isn't a camera and Hopper certainly wasn't a camera. Certain passages of light are suppressed and others are made strong for his own dramatic purposes. Those purposes one can see sometimes, more or less in a formal way; one can see in a psychological way sometimes. But they remain really in the fiber of the man, in his sense of measure, his sense of rightness. And this is why it's always hard for painters to talk to people about painting

—because one feels that control that Joel was talking about over every inch, this up, this down, this strong, this less strong. And painting is accessible to a kind of manipulation that photography, of course, isn't.

**GS:** I'm very struck by the fact that Hopper seemed to love either early morning light, very late afternoon light, or night light. I think that's not accidental. I discovered that the first time that I went to Europe I was amazed you don't need sunglasses there. There's a gentleness to the light around Paris. When you look at the Impressionist paintings, these fellows were always painting picnics on the grass, or fun in the beer garden, or something happening in the south of France. There's this brilliant blue sky and sand-colored buildings, and there's Van Gogh. When you get to Hopper, all of a sudden you have to put on your sunglasses. You are in a harsh glare of American light, but it's somehow dramatic. I always get the strange feeling that here's this sensual guy, these paintings of these beautiful erotic women in these hotel rooms, and then—*bam!*—we are closed down with a puritan restriction. He's a puritan and a sensual erotic guy all locked up and fighting, and this fellow chooses this quality of light, which happens to be American, but which is also internal—that's what his nature is.

**GL:** Do you feel that the enormous response to this Hopper retrospective exhibition is connected to a general revival of interest in realism going on today?

**WB:** I don't really see Hopper as a realist

painter. For me realism somehow has to do with, well, let me phrase this positively rather than negatively. It has something to do with what George was talking about a minute ago. Hopper is a poet. He uses the real world, and he transforms it into his own personal form for expression. That to me is not a realist.

**GL:** Are you categorizing your own work as also not realist?

**WB:** Yes, yes.

**GL:** OK. I often agree with that more limited definition of realism. But then if we speak of representational painting, a revival of interest in that, do you see this response to this retrospective as related to that interest?

**WB:** It might help a little bit, but Hopper was a painter who was highly regarded by artists of very varied persuasions, and I can't believe that they wouldn't turn out to see this show.

**JM:** I'm really more curious to see what happens after the show, in a year or two, to see what effect the book will have on the exhibitions of young painters coming up now. I think with a show like the Picasso retrospective and then the Hopper show, a lot of highly charged and respected values have been restated for students and even practicing artists to reconsider.

**GS:** I think we have to make a distinction somehow. If you say that a lot of people are loving Hopper because its realistic and, "Boy, what a relief to get away from this abstraction!"—I'm not interested in that, not at all. I think the history of twentieth-century art has been snapping and crackling with invention. I think we would be very poor if we didn't have the School of Paris, if we didn't have New York Abstract Expressionism. I know for myself, my teachers were Abstract Expressionist painters. I became interested in realism, quote, as a corrective to some of the teaching that I got that said, "Purge any trace of figurative elements out of your painting." I thought that someone was throwing the baby away with the dirty bath water, when I was questioning the process of arriving at a truthful abstraction. The only honest way that I know to arrive at an abstraction, or a piece of poetry, or a perception, or an insight is to deal with my own response to the real world. That's what I appreciate about Hopper. And what I like about Hopper is how far poetically he went, away from the real world.

**GL:** In the context of Robert Pincus-Witten's reference to you in his 1967 *Art-*

*forum* article—and I'll quote him—"the wholly unanticipated air of Edward Hopper" and of such comparisons made today by Linda Nochlin and those made in the past by William Seitz and Mario Amaya: Do you view Hopper's settings such as gas stations, restaurants, diners, subway trains, and cinemas, which can also be found in your work, as particularly American?

**GS:** I never think of those places as particularly American. I just think of them as places that are immediately outside of me. That's where I live. Obviously, that's where Hopper lived.

**GL:** Do either of you want to comment on the American qualities in Hopper's art, if you see the aspects of his painting as particularly American?

**WB:** I think that perhaps even more than gas stations and theaters, if there is an American quality in Hopper's work, it is maybe that puritanism, that restraint, that mistrust of that French surface, that nuance. I think there is something quite American about Hopper, but I would expect that of an American painter, to be American. It's not anything that I would judge him any higher for and say, "Well, it's wonderful; he's a great artist because he's American."

**GL:** Yes, the real question is, is Hopper less of a painter because he's so American? American art has always been seen as so provincial by the world, but I think that's changing now, that estimation, that evaluation. Joel, do you want to comment?

**JM:** I was just thinking about how Henry James returned to America after many years of residence in Europe; he was very moved and overcome by the beauty in ordinary things. He traveled around the country. He had been used to the salons of Europe, the Parthenon, and the great structures of history. And here he was struck by a cottage on Cape Cod, just as Hopper was, and by daily life in America. I think anyone who comes back from a place that saturates him with beautiful things to see sees his familiar surroundings with a new, heightened awareness. And I think Hopper feasted on that after awhile. *End*