



CADMUS, FRENCH, & TOOKER

THE EARLY YEARS

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

March 1—May 5, 1990

For twenty years, beginning around 1935, Paul Cadmus (b. 1904), Jared French (1905–1987), and the younger George Tooker (b. 1920), lifelong friends and collaborators, produced some of the most haunting and arresting works of their long, intertwined careers. The majority of works in this exhibition represent a closed world of elemental landscapes and bare interiors in which single figures or small groups are waiting, listening, and watching. The paintings do not represent the world of external appearances but focus on an inner reality. George Tooker referred to this when he said: “I am after painting reality impressed on the mind so hard that it returns as a dream, but I am not after painting dreams as such, or fantasy.”

From Raphaelle Peale to Edward Hopper, American realist painters have produced hermetic representations of exactly rendered figures and objects that barely maintain their distance from the magical. But the early works of Cadmus, French, and Tooker—with their enigmatic poses, dislocated perspectives, becalmed air, and sense of heightened representation—tip into the Surreal. Yet though they borrowed elements from European Surrealism, they embraced neither its central idea of the unconscious nor its organic or distorted imagery. Instead, they used Surrealist techniques to produce paintings of dreamlike fascination, causing their work to be linked to American Magic Realism of the 1940s.

As Abstract Expressionism gained prominence in the late 1940s and 1950s, Cadmus, French, and Tooker—and the American realist school in general—became marginalized. By mid-century, Cadmus’ reputation had dwindled and French and Tooker were virtually unknown. Few of their paintings had been bought by museums and those in private collections “disappeared” for decades. But the three artists turned relative obscurity to advantage, creating a working environment, hidden from public view, which fostered the development of their ideas.

Cadmus was gay and French was bisexual, but as members of New York’s artistic and intellectual community they were somewhat protected from the moral rigors of the larger society. From 1931 to 1933 Cadmus and French lived in Europe, mostly because living was cheaper, but also to gain some relative freedom and relaxation from conventions back home. In the United States, the courts had ruled homosexuality illegal, and art deemed threatening to family life was subjected to censorship. Cadmus and French read modernist literature that had been banned in the United States: James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. The books’ descriptive scenes of passion, sensuality, and free-spiritedness validated Cadmus and French’s own life-style and gave them a cultural context

in which to work. They realized that freedom of sexual choice was an integral part of a larger struggle for individual freedom; and, in their eyes, the need for this struggle confirmed the essential isolation of the human condition.

Companionship, support groups, and international ties were always important to Cadmus and French, who had met as students at the Art Students League. In 1937, French married artist Margaret Hoening. But he continued to share a studio with Cadmus in the Frenches’ brownstone on St. Luke’s Place, Greenwich Village, an arrangement that lasted about ten years. In 1944, Cadmus met Tooker, who was studying at the Art Students League, and introduced the younger painter to the Frenches; from this point on, the three artists occasionally worked alongside one another. Beginning in the late 1930s, Cadmus, Jared and Margaret French—and sometimes Tooker by the mid-1940s—spent summers in Provincetown, Fire Island, and Nantucket. Most of the time was spent in Saltaire, Fire Island, which became the setting of paintings that A. Hyatt Mayor once dubbed the “Fire Island School.” In 1937 Cadmus and French met Lincoln Kirstein, co-founder with George Balanchine of the School of American Ballet, and became part of a larger, internationally oriented arts community in New York; Kirstein married Cadmus’ sister Fidelma, a painter, in 1941.

It was not easy to be gay in America in those years, and the works of the three artists stressed aloneness, separation, and depression, and criticized intolerance and conventional family life—all in imagery that stood sharply against the aesthetic trends of the times.

French’s drawing *Sleep #1* of about 1936 contains rudimentary ideas fundamental to the early works: the separation of figures; figures organized geometrically into frontal or profile poses; the nearly nude recumbent or passive, upright or watchful figure; and the background of deserted beach.

Some of these features appear in the 1939 painting *Washing the White Blood from Daniel Boone*. French modeled his geometrical organization, the figures of Boone and the Indian behind him on Piero della Francesca’s *Baptism of Christ* of about 1450. He chose the moment in Boone’s legendary exploits when Shawnee Indians symbolically wash away the hero’s white blood to make him a member of the tribe. The painting expresses a desire for brotherhood ironically contrary to the traditional macho Boone legend. The rippled musculature, shaven heads, and skin contrasts, along with the delicate pink and neatly tied bow of Boone’s undergarment, constitute a homosexual reinterpretation of an American mythic hero.

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Paul Cadmus (b. 1904)

Two Boys on a Beach, 1938

Etching: sheet, $7\frac{1}{2} \times 9\frac{15}{16}$; plate, $5\frac{1}{8} \times 7\frac{1}{8}$

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
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Egg tempera on panel, 7×7

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Pencil and egg tempera on hand-toned paper,

$5\frac{1}{8} \times 7\frac{3}{4}$

Private collection; courtesy Midtown Galleries,
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Fantasia on a Theme by Dr. S., 1946

Egg tempera on composition board,

13×13 (sight)

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Purchase 47.1

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Portrait of Paul Cadmus, c. 1936

Graphite on paper, $8 \times 6\frac{1}{4}$ (sight)

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Oil and egg tempera on canvas, $24\frac{1}{4} \times 40\frac{1}{4}$

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Egg tempera on panel, $18\frac{3}{4}$ diameter

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Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Gift of the

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Jared French, *The Double*, early 1940s

Washing the White Blood from Daniel Boone is also French's first egg tempera work. He was introduced to the technique in the late 1930s and soon taught it to Cadmus, who, with French, taught it to Tooker in the mid-1940s. Egg tempera, a medium infrequently used since fifteenth-century Italy, was not unknown in the 1930s and 1940s, but few American artists committed themselves to it as wholeheartedly as did Cadmus, French, and Tooker. At a time when artists were moving to ever greater plasticity of paint handling, their revival of the medium was idiosyncratic. But egg tempera's static quality and cool, clear colors produce a deliberated effect well suited to the character of their works.

The deserted beaches of Fire Island in the 1940s provided the ideal American topography for representing the theme of isolation and the moods of melancholy and nostalgia that accompany it. French evokes sadness about the passage of time in *Summer's Ending* of 1939—a painting that also marks a fundamental change in his work. He described this as a shift in interest from the mere "physical aspect" of man in his "physical universe" to a concern for "man's inner reality." Two figures in the foreground, one stilled as if about to turn into a pillar of salt, loom against an empty expanse of beach.

The pose of the standing figure with towel-shrouded head shows Surrealist inspiration. Other Surreal elements—abrupt foreground juxtapositions of figures and low horizons—appeared in the paintings of the three artists during this period and, subsequently, in their photography. Cadmus, along with Jared and Margaret French, photographed themselves, friends, the beaches, and a few props, later dubbing their collaborative effort PAJAMA (for PAul, JAred, and MARGaret).

French's *Four Figures*, *The Beach*, and *The Double* of the early and mid-1940s continue the theme of figures isolated from one another on a beach. Under the influence of PAJAMA, French established a bold synthesis of modernism and the figurative tradition. These three works are remarkable among figurative images of the period for their striking and at times eccentric clarity of form and rigorous organization. The greater rigor and immobility in *Four Figures* and *The Beach* in relation to *Summer's Ending* show the gradual maturation of the theme of aloneness.

The Double has autobiographical overtones. As interpreted by Lincoln Kirstein, the terrifying female figure holding a leather wreath symbolizes the artist's mother; the naked youth half-buried in the pit and the over-dressed youth kneeling on the ground typify different personae of the artist; the figure on the fence plays a commentator or guardian role. The mother's



George Tooker, *Window I*, 1955

the works in this exhibition, are not representations of the observed world, but renderings of the spiritual, the emotional, and the social.

Spiritual life is the subject of *Birdwatchers* (1948), birds symbolizing the spirituality at which the grouped figures standing amid the paths and bridges of Central Park marvel. Religious, classical, and erotic mythology mingle in *Festa*, inspired by a religious street festival in Little Italy, the Italian section of Manhattan. In the electric arcade is a visionary representation of two female figures in front of a star, reminiscent of the Visitation in Christian iconography. However, Tooker transposed the festival into classical mythology: he intended it as a celebration of Priapus, the god of male generative power, whom he here incarnated in infant form behind the fence at left. The prominent celebrants on the right are the “parents” of Priapus, a street doll Aphrodite (goddess of love) and her guy Dionysius (god of wine and fertility), wearing a jacket bearing the insignia “Leopards.”

Some of the paintings draw on Tooker’s sightings of life observed in Brooklyn, where his spiritual interests led him to the subject of the occult: *Gypsy* was inspired by a storefront palm reader Tooker saw on Atlantic Avenue. *Window I* originated in a rear-window view of neighbors Tooker observed from his house on State Street. The back lighting of the two paintings, the shadows on the screens, and the passivity

of the figures make a dramatic and potent image of the hopelessness of the poor.

Tooker’s “reality impressed on the mind so hard” is the experience of the marginalized attempting to live in an inhospitable world—a world that Cadmus, French, and Tooker spent this period of their creative lives portraying. That loneliness is the condition of modern life is their transcendent message to us.

Josephine Gear

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Paul Cadmus, *Fantasia on a Theme by Dr. S.*, 1946

ominous presence constitutes a bitterly poignant critique of familial relationships that recalls the destructive powers of implacable matriarchal figures.

French's critique of the family took on a different but nonetheless pointed turn in *State Park*, a painting in high camp style begun on Fire Island in 1944 and finished in 1946. French uses the ridiculous to vent his pent-up spleen against "the family"—which he believed to be the source of American prejudice. The three glowering, bolt-upright figures seated in the symbolic shade of a beach umbrella represent "the family." French depicted them and the two lifeguards as a kind of moral police force absurdly rigid with righteous indignation—and fear of encountering threatening ideas.

In *The Rope* of 1954, French returned to the theme of familial ties, this time those symbolic of father and son relationships. Three clothed figures of bullying working-class men clutch trainer ropes tied to the waists of boys—one of whom is terrified—standing in or around the edge of a swimming pool. Whatever the nature of the strange relationship, it doesn't bode well for the young men: the father figures seem unready to release their firm control. This painting, too, may have an autobiographical basis.

The lyrical delicacy of Paul Cadmus' slender figures of the 1940s owes something to his proximity in that decade to the art of the fantastic. In his egg tempera canvases of the 1940s, the figures stand out for the extreme and fantastical fragility that edges them into the symbolic. An etching of 1938, *Two Boys on a Beach*, one wearing a surreal-erotic torn undervest, represents an earlier, sturdier figurative style.

From 1940 on, when Cadmus began working in egg tempera, he frequently drew inspiration from the summers on Fire Island. *Arabesque* (1941), however, uses a setting inspired by the hermetic world of ballet to which he had been introduced in 1937. The work's small scale, dramatically low eye level, carefully placed and self-absorbed figures herald a new intimacy and introspection, as well as a mystery and tension that became the hallmarks of Cadmus' lyricism.

Isolation in human relationships is a prevalent theme in E.M. Forster's novels, novels which came to have a tremendous influence on Cadmus and French and led to a friendship between Forster and Cadmus. In the 1943 drawing *To E.M. Forster*, Cadmus represents Jared and Margaret French on the beach, Jared with his back turned. The separateness that exists between close companions is also a subtext of *The Shower* (1943), a painting redolent with the languors of a day spent in the sun. It also underlies *Fences* (1946), in which the fence-



George Tooker, *Juke Box*, 1953

ing that counterpoints the standing figure's sinewy curves keeps him apart from his companion.

Cadmus' small-scale paintings of single figures—*Aviator* (1941), *Survivor* (1944), *Inventor* (1946), and *Architect* (1950)—continue the theme of aloneness. Two of the paintings have a biographical source. The lone figure on the beach holding a kite in *Aviator* was based on photographer George Platt Lynes' assistant, George Tichenor, who was later killed in combat during World War II. Its companion piece, *Survivor*, depicts Tichenor's younger brother, Jonathan, at the sea's edge amid a tangle of posts and wire. The barrier in *Survivor* erected to guard against dune erosion recalls the barbed wire of mined beaches in World War II; in the left background is a grounded kite of the kind held by the figure in *Aviator*.

Many of Cadmus' beach paintings go beyond existential isolation. The figures on the beach (a never-never region, neither land nor sea) suggest the melancholic desire of the marginalized for completion or unification. *Inventor* and *Architect* imply that one kind of fulfillment lies in creative work. The man in *Inventor*, modeled after George Tooker dressed in discarded military fatigues, represents the equilibrium of spirit to be found in creativity. The figure in *Architect*, gridlocked in window mullions and lights, with a ghostly muse as companion, offers an ambivalent, if not ironic, paean to rational genius.

In *Fantasia on a Theme by Dr. S.* (1946), anecdotal wealth and the absurd are used, unusually, to pay a tribute. Cadmus admired Dr. William Sheldon's *Varieties of Human Physique* (1940) and *Varieties of Human Temperament* (1942), which popularized the notion of judging character according to body type—thus the exaggeratedly thin, fat, and muscular types represented in the painting. But Cadmus' ready eye for the outrageous couldn't resist spoofing high camp itself: the gay communities of Cherry Grove and Ocean Beach inspired the painting's setting.

George Tooker appropriated the modernist form of French's figures and the lyricism of Cadmus' style of the 1940s for his own work, which broadened the reference to aloneness into a general condition of modern life. He moved many of the settings to urban New York and explored his abiding interest in light—as in the decorative street lights in *Festa* (1948), the light in *Juke Box* (1953), the hidden lights behind the curtain and shade in *Gypsy* (1951) and in *Window I* (1955), or the pervasive luminosity of *Bathers* (*Bath Houses*) (1950).

And Tooker created a characteristic physiognomy, the "Tooker" face: an ovoid shape that the artist intended as a cipher of the emotional state of the subject. Tooker figures are like participants in a seance, with eyes resembling heavily glazed panes. His paintings, especially



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120 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10017
(212) 878-2453
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Jared French, *State Park*, 1946