Fiction by Richard Roth

NoLab, Richard Roth's debut novel, published by Owl Canyon Press, 2019. (Owl Canyon Press shut down in 2025. However, *NoLab* remains available as an audio book from Amazon. Sometime used copies are available.)

The Kawaii Pups, sa speculative/crime short story, Mystery Tribune online, December, 2023.

A Siren Wailed on Bethune Street, a short story, posted on *Two Coats of Paint,* an online blogazine, August 11, 2023, New York

Clever Beasts, a short story, published in issue 299 of *AntipodeanSF*, an online journal of speculative fiction, Australia, 2023

The Crit, a play by Richard Roth – published in *the Art Journal,* Spring 1999 and available to read here:
This painting critique takes place somewhere in the United States, 1997. It is a weekly ritual, tonight attended by three male painting faculty – PROFESSOR JAMES, PROFESSOR GELBART, PROFESSOR GOLD – and one visiting artist/teacher from New York, HOLLY STOLZ. The eight other participants – JANINE, CISSY, DON, KAREN, A.R., LENORE, JOHAN, LOUIS – are all graduate students in a highly selective graduate painting program (they hail from the U.S., Canada, England, and The Netherlands).

The room is a student gallery space, empty but for a few broken easels, an assortment of paint splattered chairs, an open case of Rolling Rock, and the work being critiqued this evening. JANINE has six paintings along one wall – figurative work in a variety of styles, with text, painted on old roll-up movie screens (as still used in schools). Some hang on the wall and some stand freely on their tripod bases; they range from four to five feet square.

PROFESSOR JAMES: O.K., O.K., enough socializing. Its already 7:20 so let's get started. Janine, is there anything you want to say first before we begin?
JANINE: No . . . but . . . I love to paint and it really pisses me off that painting . . . that all this other shit is just . . . you know, taking over.
PROFESSOR JAMES: Janine, could you tell us which you did first?
JANINE: Well, I did these in the Summer, and these I did this Autumn, except the free-standing one over there with the cut-outs . . . it's the most recent.
(Long silent pause.)
PROFESSOR GELBART: Your love of paint comes through loud and clear, Janine. (Walking over to a painting on the left.) I really like the way this cerulean pushes against this fluffy ochre. It's exerting a hell of a lot of pressure. It's absolutely palpable. And this negative space is alive with "thingness." These are real honest expressions of paint's special properties . . . very sensitive, Janine. (Walking back to his chair, he suddenly turns and points.) That black . . . that black is blue!

CISSY: I like this pinkish scratchy area. (Pointing.)
DON: This upside-down horse-head thing is pretty neat.
KAREN: Janine, I think you need to pay more attention to composition.
PROFESSOR GELBART: How so?
KAREN: I don't know . . . it's just . . . so random.
JANINE: I wanted it to be random.
PROFESSOR GELBART: Look at these juicy strokes. The paint handling is so deft . . . so sincere . . . Janine has every right to throw in something awkward.
A.R.: Didn't Oscar Wilde say, "all bad poetry is sincere."
KAREN: There is something very ordinary about this work.
PROFESSOR JAMES: Or . . . maybe it's not ordinary enough.
DON: (Tapping his cigarette ash into an empty beer bottle, he looks at Janine.) What other shit?
JANINE: What?
DON: You said it pissed you off that all this other shit was taking over, so . . . what other shit?
LENORE: Hello? I thought we agreed not to talk about what the artiste says to start the crit . . . Janine only said around ten words and still we cling . . . . why can't we just talk about the work itself? Is that so difficult? Do we always need a crutch?
DON: (Getting down on his knees and speaking in mock fear.) We are poor cripples, please don't take away our crutches.
LENORE: Fuck you Don.
JOHAN: (Rolling a cigarette.) I do not care what the artist's intentions are. The only thing that matters is the work before us.
DON: You guys can't be serious! Intentionality is completely relevant.
HOLLY STOLZ: Am I in a time warp or what? It is 1997 – not only is the artist's intention irrelevant, but the discrete object, the precious work itself is just a prop . . .
DON: Well that's nice, but there are still a few of us dumb slobs left who do not worship irony.
HOLLY STOLZ: To quote Lenore: "Fuck you Don."
DON: That's . . .
PROFESSOR JAMES: Don, Don . . . excuse me for interrupting but I would really like to get this crit on track.
DON: I'm sorry but I think Janine should answer my original question.
PROFESSOR JAMES: Janine, would you like to respond?
JANINE: What was the question?
DON: What other stuff is taking over?
PROFESSOR JAMES: Janine?
JANINE: I guess I would just like to get some feedback about the work that's here.
LENORE: Do you look at David Salle, Janine?
JANINE: No, I'm not interested in Salle at all.
PROFESSOR GOLD: Who are you looking at?
JANINE: I don't know. (Long pause.) Like DeChirico maybe.
DON: DeChirico? Jesus!
PROFESSOR JAMES: (In a whisper.) Don, please.
(Discussion can be heard in the back of the room.)
PROFESSOR JAMES: (Looking over his shoulder.) What's up?
KAREN: We would like a no smoking policy at these crits. (The smokers groan.) There isn't any ventilation. This is a highly toxic environment.
PROFESSOR JAMES: I don't like the smoke either, but . . . well, what do we

do, vote?
DON: Paint is toxic too. Maybe the tree-huggers should find another profession.
LENORE: Let's just vote.
PROFESSOR GOLD: I like to smoke as much as anyone, but the non- smokers have a legitimate complaint. I propose we simply honor their request.
JOHAN: If I can't smoke, I'm leaving.
PROFESSOR JAMES: Anyone else object?
DON: I sure as hell do. You guys would kick Guston, and Pollock, and Rothko out on their asses . . . but . . . do whatever.
PROFESSOR JAMES: Okay, no more smoking.
KAREN: As of when?
PROFESSOR GOLD: Now!
DON: (In a squeaky voice.) Welcome to McPainting Land!
(JOHAN leaves the room.)
PROFESSOR GOLD: Let's get back to Janine. As far as the formal paint qualities go, I just don't care about that. I am looking . . . to be moved, I'm looking for some emotional charge, some connection to another human being, not some display of formal pyrotechnics and especially not for some kind of art world gamesmanship. Where is the human aspect? I don't know. I don't see it. I just don't get it. What I see is art with a capital A.
LOUIS: You are ignoring the specificity of Janine's work. A painting is not a . . .
film, for example, I mean in this case – a motion picture. Painting is a film, a thin layer applied – on – to – a support. Painting needs to be "supported." And we fail to support it when we ignore its physiognomy, its methodology, its history. Any discourse concerning painting must pay homage to its specificity. Look, Janine's "paintings" are "films" of paint caught in the act of "defacing" "film" as cinema. . . deconstructing the historical thesis that has film-slash-photography-slash-cinema leading to the death of painting.
LENORE: I like that. . . . Paint's revenge.
HOLLY STOLZ: Well it's a pretty impoverished revenge.
LOUIS: In some oblique way, I think this work traverses and interrogates the "pain" in painting . . . the pain-thing.
A.R.: Louis, that is an entertaining hermeneutical shtik, but you know we could construct hundreds of persuasive and compelling narratives around Janine's paintings . . . or any painting. When the exegesis is more fabulous than the object, I think we have a problem.
PROFESSOR JAMES: Adolph Gottlieb said, "any conclusion can be drawn from any work of art."
HOLLY STOLZ: Foucault said something like "those in power reveal truth to those unable to see or speak for themselves."
LOUIS: You guys don't get it, do you? There is an essence here ¬¬– in this work – that enables one, if he is sensitive, to arrive at certain conclusions.
LENORE: Sounds pretty phalocentric to me.
A.R.: No, you don't get it Louis. Essence is a tiny nugget that we can never truly know . . .
DON: Sounds pretty scatological to me.
(A.R. Hits DON with mock punches.)
LOUIS: (To A.R.) If you're expecting some simplistic . . . linear coherency. . . (Long pause.) Let's just drop it.

A.R.: What? Why?
LOUIS: This is just getting too personal.
A.R.: 'Cause you're losing?
LOUIS: Just drop it.
A.R. Okay, so I'll back off then.
JANINE: A.R., are you saying meaning is not fixed in the object . . . but that it's placed on it by others?
A.R.: Bingo!
JANINE: Well . . . if that's true . . . then maybe we should be, like, studying sociology instead of . . . paint.
A.R.: Cultural studies!
HOLLY STOLZ: Yeah, and you should be taking courses in real estate . . . and shmoozing 101.
PROFESSOR GOLD: Janine, I think the question of influence should be given more attention. I think you are being irresponsible when you fail to deal with your genealogy . . . and when you fail to acknowledge the history that has enabled you to do what you do.
PROFESSOR JAMES: I agree. In the end this work is more about its references, its relationship to other paintings, than anything else. Your structure – the assemblage nature of this work – comes from cubism and dadaism via Rauschenberg. Your paint handling from Morandi . . . etcetera, etcetera. . . and the subject matter owes a lot to so many contemporary artists involved with appropriation . . .
LENORE: Isn't there something a little Nicole Eisenmanish here?
A.R.: (To JANINE.) The big problem for me is what these references . . . these reference-bundles, add up to. Intertextuality is operating . . . but it just doesn't go anywhere.
HOLLY STOLZ: True enough, but if you want to be . . . painfully realistic, the game is about what is currency today and tomorrow in New York – in that sense Janine is doing sort of okay . . . but to be like really blunt – these paintings are nowhere near quirky enough.
A.R.: Yeah, they have to be to-die-for-quirky.
PROFESSOR GOLD: On the other hand. Holly, there is the perseverance strategy . . . you know – if you piss in one place long enough, you're bound to make an impression.
A.R.: Everyone knows paintings are just very expensive home decorations – high-priced tchotchkes.
DON: Would someone please pass the barf bags.
PROFESSOR GELBART: I'll take one too. (Pause.) Janine, you know who you should look at? (Pause.) What's his name? . . . Mark . . . who shows at . . . (Pause.) In SoHo . . . Mark . . .
LENORE: What does the work look like?
PROFESSOR GELBART: You know . . . painting about painting . . .
DON: What painting isn't?
PROFESSOR GELBART: . . . about modernist painting.
PROFESSOR GOLD: Yeah, I know who you mean . . . monochrome . . . he painted a history of modernist painting. One . . . a guy hitting his head against a wall . . .
PROFESSOR GELBART: Yes, the flatness of painting . . . Greenberg . . .
LENORE: Tansey, Mark Tansey.
PROFESSOR GELBART: Yeah!
(Long silent pause.)
LENORE: What about Tansey?
PROFESSOR GELBART: Well . . . it's the way Tansey uses paint to get to

ideas. I think this is also what Janine is up to in a way.
A.R.: Nothing compared to the way Spike Lee uses celluloid to get to ideas.
HOLLY STOLZ: So . . . what did you think of the suppository scene in Trainspotting? Wasn't that the most incredible display of abject . . .
PROFESSOR GOLD: Yeah . . . great . . . Did you see Smoke?
LENORE: Whoa! Last week it was sushi restaurants, the week before that it was . . . what?
DON: The islands of Greece . . . and once . . . remember . . . it was laptops!
LENORE: Jesus . . . now it's movies again . . . Can we get back to Janine, please.
LOUIS: (Correcting LENORE.) "Cinema". . . . It's "cinema."
PROFESSOR JAMES: Lenore, thanks for keeping us on course.
A.R.: There's a reason why we'd rather be talking about MOVIES. (Looking at LOUIS.)
HOLLY STOLZ: Yeah 'cause we know we should be making them.
A.R.: (To the group.) What's really at stake here? Not much. The art world is like the Titanic drifting toward the iceberg. So, why . . . might I ask, why the hell are you all so desperate to get on board?
HOLLY STOLZ: I totally fucking agree. The best artists today are engaged in finding a way out of the art world. Escaping . . . with flair . . . is the art of our time.
A.R.: Escape artists!
HOLLY STOLZ: You all should be . . . like . . . bombing Chelsea and Santa Monica, not applying for membership!
A.R.: Bubeleh! I love you! (Runs to HOLLY STOLZ and hugs her.)
HOLLY STOLZ: Whoa boy, down, down.
A.R.: Grad school is just an art world training program. We provide an endless supply of supplicants . . . and sacrificial lambs. This is a farm team for the big galleries. A trade school . . . . . but the joke is – the factory is in the rust belt. (Pause.) Art is a mass psychogenic illness.
PROFESSOR GOLD: (Noticeably angry.) Well then what the hell are you here for?
DON: Yeah, A.R. – love it or leave it.
PROFESSOR JAMES: Look . . . I don't agree with A.R. either but I would certainly defend his right . . . to be here. I approve of his oppositional stance. After all, isn't it the . . . isn't it part of our tradition?
PROFESSOR GOLD: Beauty, insight . . . history . . . genius . . . the love of paint, by God . . . . These are central . . . to the studio tradition. If you don't care about these things I really question what the point . . . why you're here. I really do.
PROFESSOR JAMES: (To PROFESSOR GOLD.) Well I think A.R. and Holly are saying some interesting things . . . and they should not be discouraged from speaking up. It may just be difficult for our generation to see the validity of these new ideas . . . or where they are heading but . . .
PROFESSOR GOLD: Bullshit!
CISSY: What are we doing here? I think its just a game. . . . It may be fun for some of you but for those who just want to paint it's . . . exasperating . . . depressing. Something that really troubles me somehow, because I think you can distinguish between . . . oh God I don't know.
A.R.: I agree about the absurdity – but for a completely different reason. Here we are, trying to help Janine and each other make more profound

paintings (though hardly any of us do straight painting) . . . its just so painfully sad . . . so shallow. . . . In the end . . . you know, only profound people can make profound paintings.
LOUIS: Cissy, there is no such thing as – quote – "just painting," if you mean by that – painting without theory.
A.R.: Yeah, Cissy. You are full of theory and all kinds of beliefs . . ideology . . . except they seem so natural you don't even notice them . . . they are hegemonic.
KAREN: Really, what are these crits for? Once again we barely even looked at the work, much less really talked about it.
LENORE: Karen, you are as responsible as anyone here for the shape of the crit. You waste our time talking about the crit itself. Every week you distract us from the work at hand with your whining about the nature of the crit . . . now secondhand smoke for godsake. Give us a break.
DON: At least it kept us from talking about Richter.
PROFESSOR JAMES: I hate to end this crit on a sour note but . . . but we're really all out of time. . . . actually past our scheduled time. Louis is putting up work next week – see you then. Thanks, Janine . . . thank you all.
DON: (As the crit breaks up, smaller groups form and the room buzzes with conversation. DON yells.) You know what Eric Fischl said when he was asked why he still painted even though painting was dead? – "NECROPHILIA!"
A.R.: Don, did you see Crash?

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