

# Figurative Painting and Its Ties to Abstract

@ 55 Mercer Gallery



Barbara Grossman, *The Lyrics*, 1999-2000. Courtesy 55 Mercer Gallery.



Peter Heinemann,  
*Head*, 1990-92.  
Courtesy 55 Mercer Gallery.

Two exhibitions present the figure as it relates to the painterly gesture. The Center for Figurative Painting is offering *Reconfiguring the New York School* (Nov. 11-Jan. 27, 2000) a classic grouping of artists with similar aims curated by Jennifer Sachs Samet. A funkier contemporary version and sister show is titled *Figurative Painting Now*, (Nov. 14-Dec. 9, 2000) at Fifty-Five Mercer Gallery. I was a curator on this exhibition, along with David Wooddell and John Bradford. We began the process with three a priori assumptions: The paintings in the current exhibition are generated from Abstract Expressionism. Further, there is a normative figural impulse in Abstract Expressionism, central to the movement that creates a dual evolution back to representation. Finally, Abstract Expressionism is a normative development of Western painting and is not a bracketed philosophical entity, or separate container called Abstraction. It's also not a one way ticket to flatness as Clement Greenberg envisioned it, but is best seen simply as painting. This suggests a figurative or representational interpretation as well as others.

Critics like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg maintained the autonomy of abstraction. While this achieved view and the hegemony of the New York School ensured a blanketed, proscribed or edited version of the artistic process during this period, spearheads like de Kooning and Pollock always maintained strong figurative ties.

De Kooning describes "The slipping glimpse", "content encountered as if in a flash" and "Human flesh was why oil paint was created" outlining an abrogated figurative position. When Harold Rosenberg describes *Woman I*, 1950, he men-

tions how the figure emerged from the painterly field. Deriving from his 20 years experience, the artist had successfully created a new kind of figure, bypassing the old observational relationships with nature. This I call internalized form, a term borrowing from psychology, invoking memory, dream, or reflection. It is relevant to many works in these shows because a painting may look representational but derive from material or psychological not merely observational sources. It also bypasses neat dualities of figuration/abstraction.

New evidence in the case of Jackson Pollock also bears closer scrutiny. The artist created his famous drip paintings only during a four-year period. Long seen as the benchmark of autonomous abstraction, William S. Rubin and others defended this position vigorously. Although Pollock did work figuratively before 1947 and information existed that he "veiled Figures" (Pollock and Lee Krasner's phrase), Rubin insisted no figurative drawing occurred in the watershed period of 1947-51.

Present research proves the contrary. Peter Namuth, son of Hans Namuth the photographer and filmmaker who photographed Pollock in 1950, had his father's footage digitized. They showed, *One*, 1950 and *Autumn Rhythm*, 1950, two of his most ambitious works began with the stenographic figure drawings as used before 1947. Like many critics, I believe that Pollock was evolving a third figural style, based on *Blue Poles*, 1952, and the black enamel paintings of 1951, but died prematurely.

The paintings in our show hang on Hans Hoffman and his relationship to his students. Hofmann a German émigré was twenty years older than the Abstract Expressionist generation. He had first hand knowledge of Cubism and Fauvism and introduced German dialectical concepts to the language of American art. His Push/Pull color theory based on tensions within the picture plane defined "plastic" relationships by color alone.

Tom Hess and Wolf Kahn declared that although Hofmann preached abstraction, an "escape hatch" always existed in his theories, which led back to the figure. Hofmann trained his students from the model. The foremost teacher of his generation, his students and followers read like a stellar list of representational painters. Most of these artist's works can be seen at The Center for Figurative Painting show: Paul Georges, Nell Blaine, Robert DeNiro, Jane Freilicher, Al Kresch, Louisa Mathiasdottir, Jan Muller, Paul Resika, Larry Rivers, George McNeal, Jay Milder, Jim Dine, Alex Katz, Lester Johnson and Bob Thompson.

The artists of this generation sought to reconcile Hofmann's color theories within a representational format. Paul Georges, also an important teacher, has work that appears in both shows. Georges' solution is to place little figures at the bottom of the picture plane and large ones on top (as in his *Diana and Acteon* series) thus inverting traditional Western perspective. Their oddness is most strik-

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ing as Mannerism unless you understand his lineage, which is to Hofmann. When these artists were grouped together it was in the most disparate of terms or under the general rubric of American Realism, rather than what I am purporting, a normative figural tradition within Abstract Expressionism itself.

Thirty-five years ago the late Philip Guston, one of the first generation Abstract Expressionists returned to the figure. By the mid-seventies he was hailed as the father of Neo-Expressionism, a category he never easily fit into. The critical discourse on Guston has dedicated much of its attention to the source of his imagery. Claims were made for de Chirico, Picasso, Surrealism, George Herriman's *Crazy Cat* comic strip among others. But seen in the light of both exhibitions, Guston is not as solitary a figure as is supposed. In fact he falls directly into the realm of our first referent, de Kooning's *Woman I*, because Guston like de Kooning pulls his late figures out of the painterly field itself. Not only does this come full circle, but also leads the way for younger painters in our show who take these stratagies and evolve them for the future of figurative painting.

The exhibition at 55 Mercer shares some established artists with the Center for Figurative Painting, like Mathiasdottir, Bell, Resika, Heinemann but also Stanley Lewis, Jack Silberman, Al Blaustein, Martha Armstrong, Patrick Morrison and others.

The artist's ages range from thirty to eighty and the works create some percussive juxtapositions: David Wooddell's brushy gestural pink and gray self-portrait against Georges fire engine orange of the same genre. John Bradford's stoic earth toned biblical scene or his Milton Avery inspired elegiac but nutty Abraham Lincoln. Peter Heinemann's Beckmanesque heads compared with Glen Cebulash's Beckmanesque multi paneled figure composition. Anthony Santuoso's brittle reflection on middle age as apposed to Jennifer Toth's bad girl whining with just the right amount of dirty paint. Barbara Grossman's neat little Matissean interior plied against the ruminations and ecstatic handling of her husband Charles Cajori.

Both shows represent a hunger for representational painting and wide enough latitude to encompass a myriad of attitudes. The normative figural impulse implies that the will to representation has not left us. Rather it ably demonstrates its ability to renegotiate new terrain, reinvigorate with contemporary philosophical doctrine and deliver what we love most about paint: structure, depth, meatiness. Its tactile nature reminds us of the sexiness of constancy.

## "Figurative Painting Now"

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Al Blaustein, *Bill and Family*, 2000. Courtesy 55 Mercer Gallery.

The cooperative 55 Mercer Gallery group show isn't officially an extension of the "Reconfiguring The New York School" exhibition at The Center for Figurative Painting. However, four of the thirty-six paintings shown at the Soho space were on loan from the CFP- two from Leland Bell and two from Peter Heinemann. Painter's included in the show are Louisa Mathiasdottir, Leland Bell, Charles Cajori, Paul Georges, Paul Resika, Peter Heinemann, Stanley Lewis, John Bradford, Martha Armstrong, Glen Cebulash, Anthony Santuoso, Jack Silberman, Barbara Grossman, Al Blaustein, Steven Harvey, Patrick Morrison, David Wooddell, Jennifer Toth. As writers Lynn Munson and Jed Perl would have it, the New York School of painting people, and their flesh, lives on.

An interesting dynamic on display here is the generational development of this cadre of figural abstractionists. Paul Georges, and more incisively Leland Bell taught painter Stan Lewis: Lewis in turn has taught two of the better younger artists included, David Wooddell and Jennifer Toth. Al Blaustein, who contributed two of the finest paintings in the show comes off as an old master. I've never seen Blaustein before, but something about the eyes of the character depicted in "The Collector" (1998), implies a severe and simultaneously humorous observational acuity. Their personal lives notwithstanding I would suppose, psychologically correlative, aesthetically Blaustein and Alice Neel should have been married.

Other pictures of particular interest were generated by Steven Harvey, "Dark Reflection, Model and Painter" (1998), as well Anthony Santuoso's two, "Portrait of the Artist mid-life" (1994) and "Father" (1993). Santuoso's technique is not as amazing, as is how delicately he handles physical and emotional male fragility. Unlike Georges, Santuoso's paintings do not exude machismo.

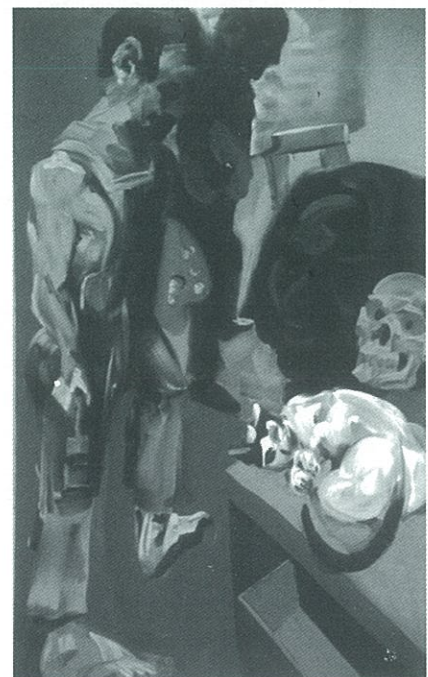
Showing great promise are David Wooddell and Jennifer Toth. After Blaustein's "Collector", the only other painting I wanted to take home was

Woodell's "Self Portrait with Reflection" (2000). The influence of mentor Stan Lewis is evident in the work. The adroit distorted quality of his figures has something in common with Lewis' pencil drawn landscapes and studio interiors (not on exhibit). The elongated deep perspectivist tendency of his teacher may or may not be out of Wooddell's grasp. Both of Wooddell's canvases in the show (the other "Chess Players" also painted this year) do little but color in a background. The younger artist's most notable strengths are his relationship to color and how he handles the brush.

Toth's "Oh What a Catch" (2000), probably was not intended to do so, but did, it make me kind of horny. It is rare for a painting to have such psychological impact it prompts physical reaction. The work is not at all pornographic, but it is sexual. A naked woman with an animal head attached to her body, wields a fishing rod that's hooked to the hem of a skirt worn by a woman, whom, in addition to the skirt, is revealed wearing a garter. The clothed lady makes an "Oh my" expression, lips and mouth open like a black hole. The background appears stage or circus-like. As the viewer, I felt like the painted fish that lies on the floor beneath the skirt-wearing nymph in the picture-one eye to the floor the other looking up the skirt. Her treatment is a bit rougher than Wooddell's, and more mentally aggressive.

Upon the publishing of this review the show will have been taken down. I hope a similar exhibition will be mounted again soon. In addition to all the other "hewer" and more "contemporary" works available for the New York art community's purview, there are and surely will come a few gems from this league of thinkers.

Christopher Stackhouse



David Wooddell, *Self Portrait with Dark Reflection*, 2000. Courtesy 55 Mercer Gallery.