

Figurative Painting Now: A Panel

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It is important that the origins and nature of this exhibition be briefly outlined so that the viewing audience may be more able to reflect on and enjoy these proceedings. We began with three a priori assumptions: The paintings in the current show are generated from Abstract Expressionism. Further, there is a normative figural impulse in Abstract Expressionism, not peripheral, but 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 entity, or separate container called Abstraction. It's also not a one way ticket to flatness as Greenberg envisioned it, but is best seen simply as painting. This suggests a figurative or representational interpretation as well as others.

The critics 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, 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 mentions 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 the show 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 striking 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 this show and the show at The Center for Figurative Painting, 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 this show who take these strategies and evolve them for the future of figurative painting.