Richard Mothes

Advisor: Peter Rostovsky

Research Paper 2

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Is Figurative Painting a Lost Form of Art?

Has contemporary art created a paradigmatic shift in figurative painting or challenged it to extinction? I have always found the Old Masters work to be both aesthetically and skillfully captivating. Their ability to capture the human figure is something I aspire to recreate within my own visual language. I was instantly mesmerized upon entering the room in the Borghese Gallery inhabited by Caravaggio paintings. However masterfully their works captivate an audience, contemporary figurative painting has seemed to find a way of transporting the viewer to a place beyond that of the visual and to a mystical place of self exploration. Has contemporary figurative painting established a genre where conceptual and representational meet in harmony, or has it completely redefined what figurative painting is?

Tradition and history are things to be celebrated as instrumental in the preservation of cultures. Ateliers pride themselves on an approach to painting that has existed for centuries by linking artists such as Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Singer-Sargent, Whistler and countless others by not only their teachers but also their teacher’s teachers. Even a few highly successful illustrators, like NC Wyeth, attended ateliers to hone their technical skills. With all of these successful artists tracing their roots back to such teaching practices the question arises, ‘exactly what is an atelier’? “To begin with, the painter’s experience is centered in seeing. The deep, rich experience of seeing is the major inspiration for a painter’s art. Learning the fine art of drawing & painting commences with learning to see. Drawing and painting begins with an artist’s visual experience that then ‘triggers’ an emotional & physical response. To ‘embody’ this human experience truthfully & creatively in expressive visual forms comprises the art.” (Holsapple)

The ability of an artist to see the unseen has been a common theme amongst Ateliers. “I found myself working through the night, relentlessly curious to learn all I could about artistic seeing.” (Aristides, 2)

While exploring the artistic eye, Ateliers generally have a regimented curriculum for instructing the hand. “The rate at which students progress through the Drawing and Painting Program varies by individual, and normally requires a minimum of three years to complete. Classes meet Monday through Friday from 9:00am to 4:00pm. First year drawing and sculpture students are required to attend Anatomy Lectures which are held on Monday evenings from 5:00-7:00pm. Students are placed in an additional figure drawing class one evening a week. All students are encouraged to participate in the Friday evening Art History lectures and the technical demonstrations on materials & techniques held during the academic year.” (Jacfirenze) Years of instruction in a rigorous environment focused on foundational principles of painting and drawing tends to be a recurring theme among Ateliers.

It makes perfect sense that this rigid pedagogy was required to create masterful works of art. “To optimize the most visual or colorful effects from the limited palette, Old Masters created rich color effects, or luster, by transparently layering one color pigment over another.” (Brooker and Cretara, 20) As oil paint became available during the High-Renaissance, the method of direct painting where a work could be finished in a single day became another option for applying paint. These and other methods are used to give the foundational support for artists to paint with the skill expected of a high-level representational painter. An argument against this may say “ No doubt it is an excellent discipline to study the Old Masters, in order to learn how to paint, but it can be no more than a superfluous exercise if your aim is to understand the beauty of the present day.” (Baudelaire, 7) I would have to disagree here. Once an artist can move and mix paint in such a manner as an Old Master, they carry within themselves the ability to recreate any texture no matter its familiarity. The hand will know how to recreate the image if the mind permits.

Ever since the Neo-Expressionists brought figurative painting out of the shadows and back into mainstream art, Contemporary Figurative painting has pushed all aspects of classical figurative painting to extremes. The bright colors, raw emotional content, heavy brush strokes and mark making introduced a new expressiveness to figurative painting. “As the American anti-aesthetic devaluation of skill waned, Neo-expressionism, New Image, Bad Painting, Appropriation, and other movements also rendered the art world safe for figuration again.” (Kratz and Colacello,11) I think that if we look beyond the celebrity of the Neo-expressionists and look at the art, the emotion delivered through the medium and social context of the work opened the door for artists to redefine what Figurative Painting could be.

This notion of moving away from the eye to emotion was not new. First Baudelaire, and then Kandinsky echoed the idea that art was only about affecting the emotional state of the viewer and changing the current state of mind. “One of the things that the new figurative art does is show the dubiousness-not to say sever limitedness-of what Baudelaire called the “cult of emotions” that began with romanticism(non-objective art is a sort of rarefied romanticism) and dead-ended in Abstract Expressionism, said to have begun with Kandinsky’s delusion of spiritual grandeur, not to say grandiose gesturalism.” (Kuspit) Kandinsky may have been grandiose like Donald Kuspit says, but he may have been correct in that painting needed to move in a new direction. It would only make sense for figurative painting to survive, artists had to give more to an audience than a visual experience.

Since the 1950s the ease at which people have been able to capture their own visual experiences, through point and shoot cameras and now smartphones, has fostered an obsession with capturing moments in time. “It’s easy to see how photography, both the popular and more ambitious kind, can become a substitute for the contemplative act of observation…..Couldn’t we characterize our age as having an obsessional hunger for images?” (Hennessy) [[1]](#footnote-0) There really was nowhere else for figurative painting to go but away from the representational image of the human form, regardless if people are no longer observing because they are busy recording their lives a certain amount of desensitization to human physicality is unavoidable.

Some artists have taken full advantage of the camera’s ability to not only capture moments but objects the human eye cannot see in striking detail. In this situation, artists look to skillfully duplicate the captured images. “…the camera is a tool and not a crutch” (Meisel) Other artists like Gerhard Richter, Glenn Brown, and Luc Tuymans question the filtered view of the camera that has captivated the world and use their own works to question the validity of the camera lens’ abilities capturing reality. The camera can only distinguish 3 colors, where the human eye is capable of closer to a million. I’ll have to humbly disagree with Louis Meisel. The camera is a crutch if it’s more than an aid.

Still others, like Emily Mae Smith, have used figurative painting to make more of a universal statement by using materials that are more widely understood. Some may not agree that a broomstick displaying human emotions is an example of high art. “Such quirky, esoteric mash-ups feel less like stylistic innovations and more like branding exercises, reflecting a present in which one’s ability to market oneself is more important than mastering a craft or coming up with fresh ideas.” (Kissick) Maybe Dean Kissick is correct in that the work is not a classically painted ‘figurative’ piece, but its success lies not in its ability to capture an individual on canvas but encompasses countless others. Just as Emily Mae Smith is using household items and themes from famous paintings to translate a thought, many other artists are recreating age-old works within a contemporary context. Does that signify a lack of new ideas? Is it a way for artists to assure a connection with an audience to make their work credible? Is it to increase sales? Is it being clever? As long as the art is being consumed and fetching high dollars those questions almost become irrelevant. Don’t they?

No matter how artists choose to paint the human figure, there is still a love of paint included within them all. “Paintings create pauses in life, and offer distillations of subjects rather than unconnected snapshots.” (Mullins, 17) Society is so interconnected through screens that there will surely, if it hasn’t already happened, be a move back to unfiltered viewing. A return to the figure and human connection is something that many are longing for, and I see it not long before a move away from a digitally processed existence.[[2]](#footnote-1) When all is said and done, there is much more to humanity than a physical body. Just as all forms of identity are constantly changing, so should the way we define ourselves.

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1. This was an article written in 1979 that is even more relevant today. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. As companies realize working remotely is more cost effective and expand the possibilities of employees, digital meetings will be here to stay. This will undoubtedly lead people to search out a more physically interactable world in contradiction to their forced digital existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)