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Alina Cohen, "What Makes A Figurative Painting Good?," *Artsy*, Apr 11, 2019



What Makes a Figurative Painting Good?



Tammy Nguyen

Đức Mẹ Chuối, 2018
CRUSHCURATORIAL



Jesse Mockrin

Remedy, 2018
Night Gallery

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The most famous artwork in all of Western literature, the fictional portrait of Dorian Gray, imagines figurative painting to be transformative, magical, and a bit evil. Its creator, Victorian writer Oscar Wilde, dreamt up a picture in which the subject aged and grew uglier while his real-life counterpart stayed youthful and handsome. Wilde's story follows a long tradition of superstitions regarding figurative art: some Jewish and Islamic traditions banned human representations, fearing they'd become objects of idol worship.

If figurative painting could once inspire fear and awe, the form became nearly passé as the art establishment became enamored with abstraction in the mid-20th century. While artists have never stopped creating human likenesses, critical attention and praise began promoting more conceptual work. Back in 2009, *Guardian* critic Jonathan Jones even wrote that “most figurative art being made in Britain today is derivative, shallow nonsense.” Yet over the past 15 years, some publications have also asserted that figuration is back and as interesting as ever.



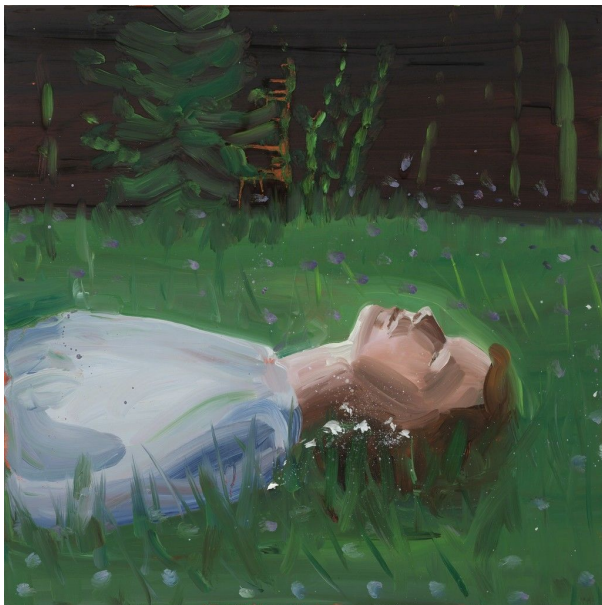
Jesse Mockrin *Abduction*, 2018
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Though other art forms—such as abstract painting, conceptual art, and performance —have long enjoyed reputations for being more intellectual endeavors, when done well, figurative painting can be just as challenging, stimulating, and groundbreaking. To understand what makes a great figurative painting today and why contemporary artists still gravitate toward the genre, we asked a few of the painters themselves. Together, they offer a compelling case for why they're working in today's most vibrant aesthetic mode.

“One of the exciting reasons to paint the figure in 2019 is the expansion of whose images are being depicted and seen,” Los Angeles–based artist Jesse Mockrin recently told *Artsy*. “Female painters, queer painters, and painters of color are creating images of themselves and their communities...mirroring the culture’s shift towards inclusivity at large.” As increasingly diverse groups of artists enter the canon, so do the equally disparate subjects they create. Mockrin herself samples from art-historical paintings—she riffs on fragments of canvases by Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and John Singer Sargent, for example, and renders them in her own contemporary (female) hand. Her figures are often androgynous, alerting viewers to the fluidity of gender not just in 2019, but throughout the history of painting.



Anna Bjerger *Rest*, 2019
Galleri Bo Bjerggaard



Haley Josephs *Sippy Cup Girl*, 2018
Jack Barrett

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Good figurative painting can also go beyond reinterpreting single historical artworks—it can also reference entire traditions. One of Mockrin’s favorite artists working in the genre, Kara Joslyn, pushes figuration forward by using unusual materials. With polymer car paint and airbrushing, she creates dimensionality while referencing sculpture, photography, craft and art history—all on a single canvas.

Tammy Nguyen, who lives and works in New York, also points to inclusivity as a crucial element of these works. “Figurative paintings are provoking very stimulating conversations right now, particularly those made by people of color, women, queer folks, and any people of lesser-known backgrounds,” she said.



Marlerie Dumas

Naomi, 1995

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

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Nguyen herself makes paintings that reimagine mythical and art-historical characters such as the cyclops or the goddess Venus emerging from the sea. On her canvases, they become bright-yellow characters of ambiguous sex. Two of her favorite up-and-coming figurative painters, Meena Hasan (who uses Indian Khadi paper) and Adam de Boer (who works in leather carving, batik, and Indonesian tile), both “incorporate materials and techniques that have been excluded from Western art history and have been explained and Other-ed by Western anthropology,” Nguyen said. She believes that viewers can walk away from such figurative paintings with a new sense of humility as they learn more about the artist’s world: a sentiment that could possibly lead to “a paradigm-shift in cultural history.”

In Mockrin and Nguyen’s estimations, then, contemporary figurative painting is good if it makes viewers think differently about art history and widely accepted cultural tenets. The best figurative painting can also disrupt our ideas of how the body in a painting—and in our world—should look.



Esteban Ocampo

Chivatour en La Calidosa, 2017

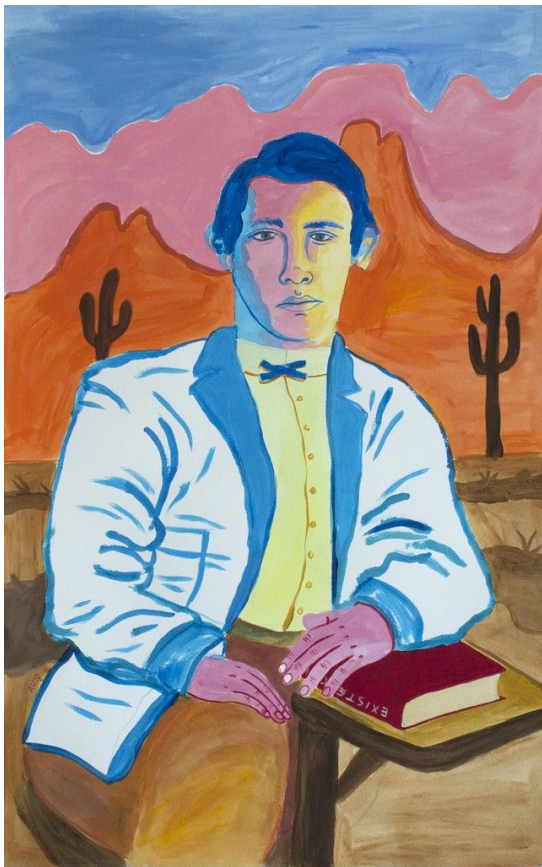
ZieherSmith

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Swedish artist Anna Bjerger paints images from found media (culled from journals, manuals, old photographs, and other sources). “A good figurative painting does something to you, surprises you, takes you somewhere different, is convincing and generous. A good painting often leaves you speechless,” she said. Like her peers, Bjerger also ties a figurative painting’s merit to the response it elicits in an individual. She admires the paintings of Marlene Dumas, whose work “feels naked yet lush”; the South African painter “manages to transcend meaning in a way that never feels blunt,” Bjerger said.

To ensure that figurative paintings do elicit a reaction in the viewer, it’s the artist’s job to keep working and making whatever feels most important in the moment. “If an artist is compelled to make an image,” offered Nguyen, “they should do so without overthinking its urgency or its reasoning to exist—figuring out those big-stake questions takes a lot of time and deep reflection.”



Alejandra Hernandez

BILLY, 2018
Gallery Fritz



Chantal Joffe

Ishbel II, 2018
Victoria Miro

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Alejandra Hernández, who maintains a studio in Bogotá, Colombia and makes colorful portraits of contemporary subjects, certainly shares that attitude. When asked, “Why make figurative paintings in 2019?” she answered, “Why not?” Painting, for her, slows down the pace of contemporary life, particularly in our visually saturated culture. Since the advent of photography in the mid-1800s, opposition to figurative painting has argued that there are more accurate, realistic ways to capture a body than the fallible brush and human gesture. Around 1839, French painter Paul Delaroche famously declared: “From today, painting is dead.”

It’s only dead, of course, if you’re trying to compete with photography (and even then, painters ranging from Chuck Close to Vija Celmins have made intriguing photorealistic work that comments on the medium). Hernández, in contrast, doesn’t believe that anatomical and perspectival correctness should matter when we judge figurative canvases. It’s more interesting, she thinks, for artists to “play with all the variables (time, structure, composition, color, matter, perspective, atmosphere) and turn them upside down, mix them up until they can finally collide and form an image that can hold itself together.”

The ability to portray an imaginative, alternate reality can be a figurative painter’s greatest asset—the art form allows artists to revel in the peculiar and uncanny as they render life askew. Hernández herself is a fan of figurative painters such as Monica Hernández, Haley Josephs, Chantal Joffe, and Esteban Ocampo, who, as she put it, echo the human experience of “tiptoeing in this strange and exhilarating society.”