

# Figuring Figuration

Larne Abse Gogarty laments the absence of serious critical debate about the return to figuration in painting, especially the seeming lack of awareness of the high stakes involved in depicting people in relation to the politics of representation.

On 17 January 2023 the artist Katja Seib posted an image to her Instagram Stories of a squished tube of paint with the line, 'and out of a sudden [sic] everyone hates figurative painting again'. While glib, Seib's comment is provocative, given the exponential boom in figurative painting over the past decade or so, from which she has certainly benefitted (Salerooms *AM443*, 444, 445). In December 2022, the critic Barry Schwabsky also sounded the alarm, publishing a piece in *The Nation* which, while extolling the virtues of the artists Christina Quarles, Issy Wood and Paula Wilson, suggested the enthusiasm for figurative painting may be nearing exhaustion. The category of 'zombie abstraction' had, of course, already been repurposed in 2020 by Alex Greenberger to describe the market's appetite for so-called 'zombie figuration'. I want to take stock here of this rise and potential decline of the genre in the recent past, making connections to historical 'returns' of the figure while also addressing how and why this kind of painting has been granted primacy within the art world's response to recent struggles around the politics of identity.

Seib is among the painters whose work I became aware of around 2018, after I started working at the Slade School of Fine Art. In my first term in the job, I saw dozens of paintings of people being made: from ethereal color field-style canvases with floaty female

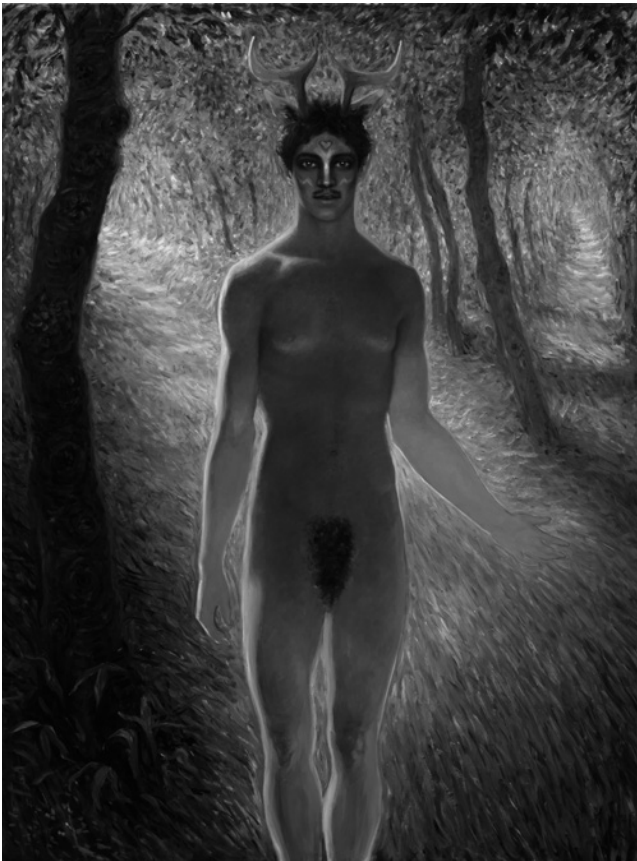
figures to large grotesqueries which situated painting as storytelling; from neon cartoon-like figures situated in voids to energetic portraits which evoked a sustained intimacy between sitter and painter. Despite my close engagement with contemporary artists who work with figuration, including Nicole Eisenmann and Kerry James Marshall (Interview *AM421*), as an art historian trained in the histories of western modernism, the dominance of representational forms of painting as compared with abstract painting among young art students was surprising, especially given the fact that there seemed to be little reference to the fraught debates that have accompanied the history of figurative painting after abstraction.

Since then, while looking at all the endless pictures of people made and/or exhibited in recent years - at work, in galleries, on Instagram and in magazines - I have consistently puzzled over what kind of position painters working with representing people are seeking to carve out today. In earlier returns to figuration, painting people was sometimes viewed as regressive and indicative of artistic conservatism or, conversely, privileged as uniquely capable of conveying political struggles, disenfranchisement and suffering. The conflict between these positions has had various flashpoints, from the arguments over the merits of realism vs abstraction as a revolutionary art on the left during the 1930s to the debates about abstraction vs representation within the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the US. Such discussions have often been folded into bigger questions about the politics of representation, as well as the fluctuating relationship between artistic and political radicalism. As an example, one could consider Frank Bowling's 1971 criticism of the work of figurative painter Benny Andrews as a 'denial of form', or Benjamin Buchloh's scorching analysis in 1981 of the return to figuration in neo-expressionism as being marked by authoritarian, proto-fascistic tendencies. In the complex history of figurative painting after the ascendancy of abstraction, the genre has repeatedly been situated as having specific purchase on the struggles over who counts as human. While on the one hand it has been argued that representation is humanising, on the other it has been viewed as cementing continuing forms of de-humanisation at worst and, at best, as constraining the modes of expression available to those historically marginalised from the institutions of modern art.

Moving towards the present, it is somewhat surprising that few of the arguably central critical voices on contemporary painting, such as David Joselit or Isabelle Graw, have had much to say about the flourishing of figuration over the past decade. This may be to do with the fact that, as Niklas Maak writes, 'figurative painting has become a kind of separate artistic biosphere ... unaffected by art-critical and art-historical debates on painting as a medium'. Yet it is also clear that, while Joselit's 2009 essay 'Painting Beside Itself' remains an obligatory guide to 'network' painting, it has little purchase on more recent figurative painting which typically strives for authenticity, not to mention virtuosity. Joselit's account of how network painting relates to the history of painting can be summarised in his description of how 'a Poussin might land in the hands of Jutta Koether, or Stephen Prina might seize



Hamishi Farah, *Joey*, 2020



TM Davy, *Satyr in the magic forest*, 2022

the entire oeuvre of Manet'. While it is clear enough to see how Koether and Prina negotiated the so-called 'death of painting' through emphasising painting as a form of mediation or 'network', Joselit's analysis of those practices cannot really speak to the investment in painterly technique and emotion across a wide-ranging sphere of contemporary painting, from so-called queer figuration to Jordan Casteel's realist portraits or Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings's collaborative frescos, which reach towards history painting.

Indeed, Joselit writes that 'whether in a ludic, or a despairing mode, figuration is partially digested into pure passage', a line I take to signal that figuration was one vehicle among many within network painting. This view strongly relates to Koether's description of painting as an 'abandoned building' when she started making work in the late 1980s, meaning that her relationship to the medium was something like being a squatter, tinkering away with discarded property, the critically devalued status of painting at the time enabling a certain openness as a thinking space or 'psychic site'. Yet, for all this, as Manuela Ammer explains, while it may be possible for figures to appear as 'abstract' in a painting since the 1960s, the capacity for a figure to be fully abstract, in any ideological sense, is limited. And for many of the contemporary painters I am thinking about, they are working in

a moment in which the medium, and the specific practice of painting people, is far from the abandoned building described by Koether. Rather, it might be compared with new-build luxury flats, perhaps erected on a site which was formerly home to a bourgeois mansion block or social housing, given that figurative painting for much of the 20th century vacillated between association with the last gasps of academicism and forms of realism that centred on picturing dispossession, poverty and suffering. In contrast to those positions, the orientation of a significant portion of contemporary figurative painting is towards propertied forms of self-possession: less a thinking space and more a self-actualisation space, marked by shiny exteriors and Instagram-ready subject matter that prioritises photogenic forms of pleasure.

While there has been limited critical discourse compared with the seeming ubiquity of figurative painting in the present, the furore concerning Dana Schutz's 2016 painting *Open Casket*, displayed at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, is one of the few instances in which the high stakes involved in painting people have been held up to public as well as critical scrutiny. Schutz's painting depicted the body of the 14-year-old black boy, Emmett Till, who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955. Following his death, Till's mother, Mamie, organised the publication of photographs of the open casket in *Jet* magazine, an African-American publication, which led to this case becoming a catalysing moment in the Civil Rights Movement. When Schutz's painting was received with artist-led protests and an open letter requesting it be removed from the Biennial on the grounds that it profited from the spectacle of racist violence (see Hannah Black profile *AM412*), Schutz defended her work by asserting 'I don't know what it is like to be black in America, but I do know what it is like to be a mother'. This is a claim which, in asserting Schutz and Mamie Till's shared identity of motherhood, suggests that sameness underpins solidarity. Following the Schutz case, one would have expected to see a continued sense of the high stakes involved in the 'return' of the figure, particularly given that the places where this type of painting is primarily being made and exhibited have seen a simultaneous wave of struggles around race, sexuality and gender. While I don't want to dwell on the well-trodden Schutz controversy in much more detail, two important elements are worth pausing upon.

First, for many of her critics, Schutz's decision to paint Emmett Till lying in his casket was a cynical form of seizure because, as George Baker writes, the subject aligned with 'the disfigured figures of her art', collapsing Till's death with the 'artist's own aesthetic' - that is, a kind of repurposed expressionism where disfigurement cohered with that style. This is a gesture Baker associates with one of painting's founding myths: that of Narcissus, and the idea of boundless self-love. Or in other words, the inability to recognise the other unless you see yourself there. How does this notion of boundless self-love via painterly

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representation manifest in relation to the contemporary discourses of self-realisation? And, second, how might Schutz's notion that the work's ethical basis rests on her shared identity as a mother with Mamie Till indicate broader limits on how recent figurative painting conceives its politics?

Consider, for instance, the work of artists who have been associated with what has been described as a school of 'queer figuration', including TM Davy, Louis Fratino and Doron Langberg. Much writing on these painters notes how their recycling of art-historical conventions makes a claim to novelty through the fact that their subjects often include people, and the experience of people, who have historically been excluded from the canon. For the critic Joseph Henry this isn't quite enough, and he relates this artistic formula of, for example, 'cubism + queer life = relevance', to the contemporary mainstreaming of LGBTQ+ politics. Visiting a Fratino exhibition at Sikkema, Jenkins & Co in New York, against the background of a heavily commercialised World Pride in 2019 – the rainbow flag was festooned throughout the city and there was widespread representation of LGBTQ+ lives in commercial advertising – he characterised the situation as one where 'the world gaslit us with tolerance'. This exquisite turn of phrase sharply points out the limits of the political purchase of works such as Fratino's, whose inclusion as an example of queer representation in an otherwise intact canon directly matches the liberal, capitalist notion that freedom of choice represents real freedom.

This notion of adding historically marginalised artists to the canon as a corrective is unfortunately widespread in our current moment, as exemplified in the utter banalisation of feminist art history in Katy Hessel's *The Story of Art without Men*, but also within much recent curatorial history. Indeed, the impulse I am partially pursuing here, to historicise this current phase of figuration's return, is made more compelling because of the numerous institutional revivals of previously marginalised practices. The curatorial gesture of 'correcting the canon' is rarely without complications or compromise. For instance, the elevation of Alice Neel and Charles White to 'great painter' status through major retrospectives has involved an inevitable minimising of the way their commitment to painting people was inextricable from their commitments to communism. Or we could think about how the rehang of MoMA in New York to showcase artists including Florine Stettheimer and Faith Ringgold has involved revising its own history as an institution steeped in boosting the hegemonic status of high abstraction in the mid 20th century. Other examples of curating alternative genealogies to contemporary figurative painting might include the renewed visibility of the Chicago Imagists; the forthcoming exhibition tour of Martin Wong; the centrality of Leonora Carrington to last year's Venice Biennale; or the retrospectives of artists including Claudette Johnson

and Lubaina Himid – practices which each shed light on the various turns of figuration today.

Returning to the question of how current figurative painting engages the politics of identity, Henry writes that Fratino's work stimulates 'the immediate gratification of identification', whether 'politicised as a mode of solidarity ("the people in that painting look like me and do what I do")' or through the depiction of erotic pleasure. I want to push at Henry's description of solidarity which centres – like Schutz's mobilisation of motherhood as the ethical ground to *Open Casket* – on the idea of sameness. While Schutz's articulation of sameness rested on experience (motherhood) as a means to override other differences, and Henry's rests on optics that may of course also complicate other differences, both positions suggest that solidarity is based on identification, or that this kind of similarity between subjects ensures a 'correct' progressive politics. This emphasis on sameness does little but describe the stultifying forms of liberalism that dominates the art world (as in canon-correction) and animates the politics of a large portion of recent paintings made of people. Identity is situated as a special form of property, painted into the canvas in ways that seek to appeal to fellow proprietors, and, if that isn't available, the work can always be purchased, displayed and circulated in ways that provide buyers, viewers and institutions with a piece of that property, enabling an expansion of the forms of ownership previously in their command. Again, this is what an additive approach to the canon does. It is less a disruption of art's property relations and more an expansion of them. And as Robin Kelley writes, 'solidarity is not a market exchange', which relies on such forms of equivalence, but rather necessitates struggling alongside people with whom you don't share much – or perhaps anything. It is about being open to forms of commitment and dependency that might affect your own status, wealth or way of living.

The problem of this idea of sameness as a weakened form of solidarity can also be found in the notion that friendship and affirmation is the root of a progressive politics, a quality that runs through much of TM Davy's work. My first encounter with Davy's paintings was through the screen of a friend's phone in New York. Visiting in early 2020, just before looking at art on screens would become the primary way it was viewed during the early phase of the pandemic, I was both amused and baffled by my friend's insistence that Davy's work was being championed within the New York art world, but they also explained that this was partly to do with the artist's circle of friends. I tried to check my response to these sentimental portraits, paintings of horses and beach scenes, questioning my immediate distaste. One of his series shows a single figure or couple holding candles in a darkened space, providing a kind of turbo-charged chiaroscuro. Other paintings show his subjects outside, frolicking in the ocean, lying on the beach, kissing, hugging. More recent

works appeal to symbolism, mysticism and fantasy, including paintings of satyrs in forests and elves bearing candles whose psychedelic kitsch, I would argue, actually makes them more interesting. Often the paintings are portraits of Davy's friends/celebrities in the art world (Langberg makes an appearance, as does Wolfgang Tillmans). Animals are a recurring fixture, from monumental oil paintings of noble-looking horses on darkened backgrounds, to cats, dogs and bunnies rendered in smaller pictures on paper made with pastel and gouache. I have a note from that initial encounter, which reads 'This is what art history is afraid of. But it's also where identity becomes kitsch', two ideas which continue to inform my understanding of his paintings.

In the notion that this is what art history is afraid of, I mean the fact that this work has gained commercial, exhibition and some critical value despite an overt sentimentality and investment in virtuosity that connects Davy with the kind of values that more typically mark the success of populist painters such as Jack Vettriano. Davy's paintings displace the highbrow notions of 'good taste' that dominate art-historical understandings of style, in the form of continued investments in pared-back, minimal aesthetics as well as the avoidance of sentiment and perhaps even of pleasure. On paper, these sound like good reasons to like Davy's work for the way that it demolishes the pretensions of the critical and art-historical establishment towards critical 'distance'. Strangely, however, the work does not seek to operate at a distance from the establishment, but rather embraces academic conventions of painterly mastery and the influencer-adjacent machinations of the mainstream art world. Its appeal is less to the lowbrow, camp, kitsch and trashy, and

more to middlebrow sensibilities and tastes. Moreover, the public display of friendship and intimacy seems less a radical queering of the family, and more a showcasing of a quasi-public-facing 'scene'. If the work of Davy, Fratino, Langberg and others has repeatedly been grouped together, I want to suggest here that this should be understood not only through their shared investment in technique, subject matter and recycling of historical styles, but also because their work offers no view of life that isn't affirmative and based on recognition. In this, it becomes hard to disentangle their practice from mainstream representations of the successful individual as one who is self-realised and recognised by society; notions underpinned by property ownership both historically and today.

In thinking about this subject, I have frequently returned to a quote from Philip Guston: 'I see the studio as a court ... The act of painting is like a trial where all the roles are lived by one person. It's as if the painting has to prove its right to exist.' Dating to the period after Guston's own scandalous return to figuration in his 1970 exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery in New York, the court as a space of relentless injustice is perhaps an odd metaphor with which to justify the existence of a painting. Yet the idea of why an artwork needs to exist remains a question to explore, and perhaps the notion of proving its right to exist indicates the thought process and social commitment of the painter, over and above technical virtuosity, or an untrammelled access to the 'self'. This puts me in mind of Kerry James Marshall's statement that 'artworks are not mystical enchantments. I think of artworks as things you build', because building signals the importance of method and making. Or we could turn to Koether's description of how 'queer painting' and

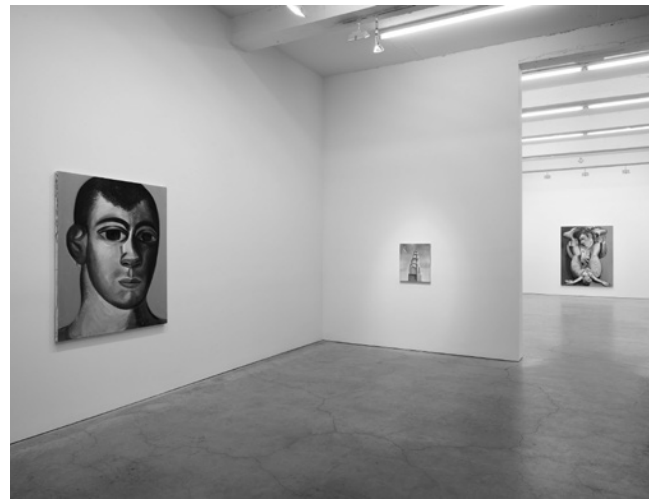


Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings, *Republic*, 2020

'women painters' became her guide during painting's period of critical disfavour, and her explanation that her engagement with artists including Marsden Hartley, Pavel Tchelitchew and Georgia O'Keeffe was dismissed as kitsch but, as she explains, 'you start with Florine Stettheimer and you end up somewhere with Jack Smith and Mike Kelley'. Here, the homophobic and misogynistic 'fear of kitsch' is transparent, mapped on to the preservation of masculinity and the canon, and so engagement with those artists offers great potentiality in terms of where they lead you and the different stories that can be told through those practices. Koether's emphasis on how she moved between Stettheimer, Smith and Kelley indicates how her work occupies that 'thinking space' where the artist must make those connections - or builds a case, to return to Gaston's metaphor of the court.

Among more recent painters who actively seek to plumb the unknowability of the other in ways that are more unsettling, or more adequate to the complexity of social relations (because, after all, this is what paintings of people lead us towards), I think of the late Noah Davis's painting *Bad Boy for Life*, 2007, which I saw on the same trip to New York during which I had the conversation about Davy. The painting shows a young black boy, perhaps nine or ten, held prone over a middle-aged black woman's lap, presumably a family member or a caregiver. The woman lacks a mouth, and her eyes stare intently back towards the viewer. Her hand is held aloft, presumably about to spank the boy. The scene takes place in a domestic interior, and to their right is an otherwise ordinary-looking lamp with a peculiarly artificial-looking neon green stand. The boy looks glassy eyed but is not overly distressed. His arms are held out straight, straining towards the floor. Over the woman's shoulder a painting hangs on the peach and beige striped wallpaper that looks a little like a reproduction of Claude Monet's *Haystacks*. The painting's title recalls P Diddy's 2001 hit of the same name, a humorous move that combines the punishment of a child with the bravado of the rapper during what was arguably the worst phase of his musical career. Another painting by Davis, *Untitled (Moses)*, 2010, shows a toddler, perched in a sink with his back to the viewer. One foot is submerged in a pool of brownish water, the other bent precariously as the child makes his escape. The hand of a caregiver enters the frame of the painting from the right, reaching towards the child. Both these paintings show domestic scenes of intimacy, but in ways that emphasise the complexity of dependency, love and relationships. Violence hovers at the edge but is treated with a kind of humour and casualness rather than tragedy, not least through the titles of Davis's works. A baby bathing in a sink is a scene predisposed towards sentimentality, but none is present here. The title - *Moses* - connects this scene with something bigger: the sink becomes the metaphorical basket, the peril of the journey down the river is now just the danger of a toddler slipping in the sink, again playing with the scale of the scene in terms of its meaning.

Two 2020 paintings by Hamishi Farah also come to mind, namely *Joey* and *Matthew*, which depict two white American men who were arrested in Carrol, Iowa, after attempting a burglary and whose attempt at disguise was captured in their mugshots, which formed the basis for Farah's paintings (both had scrawled marker pen on their faces, Joey creating a scribbly beard and Matthew having drawn on a mask).



Lou Fratino, 'Come Softly to Me', installation view, Sikkema Jenkins & Co, New York, 2019

Painted in acrylics and permanent marker on linen, like Farah's more well-known work *Arlo*, 2018, which depicted Dana Schutz's son, the portraits have an acerbic quality to them. Yet because each painting prompts the viewer to puzzle at their meaning, the high stakes involved in the representation of people are addressed in ways that are neither moralising nor do they rest on any shock value. Both Davis and Farah ludically layer up their paintings with references, but in ways that are distinct from the ironising, distanced tendencies of network painting and, because there is a kind of urgency in the scenes' subject matter, the viewer is pushed towards a thinking space, rather than what Theodor Adorno described as a 'culinary consumption' - that is, the avoidance of anything but experiences of pleasure which reaffirm the individual.

How this 'return to figuration' will be historicised in years to come is yet to be seen, but one would expect a more urgent set of questions to emerge from the intense painting of people during a period when the politics of representation have never been so high. Perhaps the strangest aspect of this recent history is that we may have seen the most widespread and visible 'return to figuration' after abstraction yet, but without much debate over its stakes. I have said little about the machinations of the art market here but, in closing, it cannot be avoided. The proximity of artists and the market is closer than ever, and, while some of the figurative painters of the past worked with that genre in explicitly politicised terms, now that work has made its way towards mainstream success, as in the case of Neel, White and Wong, to name but a few. And artists who take up similar subject matter in terms of a politicised engagement with realism and representation, such as Casteel and Eisenmann, are readily welcomed by the market and arts' institutions, despite their work engaging in the representation of people in pictures who continue to be marginalised in the everyday workings of those establishments. There lies the contradiction, and while I don't want to end with a crude take about recuperation and representation, it is hard to avoid. Simply put, this isn't an argument *against* representation, but a note of scepticism about what hyper-visibility in the present means, when few of the institutions organising 'success' have changed.

**Larne Abse Gogarty** is a writer, and lecturer at the Slade School of Fine Art.