

What's Wrong With the New Figurative Painting?

With dealers and curators jumping on the figurative bandwagon, we have to look more closely at whether a new cohort of painters succeeds at what they're attempting.

By Barry Schwabsky | OCTOBER 30, 2019



Doron Langberg's *Daniel Reading*, 2019. (Courtesy of Yossi Milo Gallery)

It's not so easy to make a fresh-looking abstract painting these days. More than a century after the pioneering work of Kandinsky, Malevich and company, abstraction can no longer depend for its vitality on the reassuring illusion of historical necessity. Yet some artists are still finding a way to make it new. But by one of those curious quirks of cultural logic and despite some commentators' recurring laments that young artists today lack historical consciousness, a lot of young artists are looking even deeper into the past for their stylistic models. If the likes of Nicole Eisenman and Kerry James Marshall rank high among the cynosures of today's painting scene, it's because they've arrived at ways to make figurative painting look new again while addressing quotidian existence today—making a new kind of painting of modern life, to borrow Baudelaire's phrase.

Eisenman and Marshall are established midcareer artists, but their example (and others') has inspired a new cohort of younger figurative painters, each trying to thread the needle of contemporaneity in a different way. Their efforts have been inspiring to see. But increasingly, I've been finding myself more uneasy as I keep coming across more new figurative art in galleries and museums. With dealers and curators jumping on the figurative bandwagon, it has become more and more evident that there's a lack of discernment, that the self-appointed gatekeepers are all too happy to find work that ticks certain boxes without looking too closely at whether it succeeds at what it's attempting. And as I remarked in reviewing the most recent Whitney Biennial, these gatekeepers tend to choose work that, to my eye, at least, is a little too wedded to history, almost unthinkingly assiduous in delving into the resources offered by figurative traditions.

The same feeling hit me again when I hit the New York galleries again after their summer break. To be clear, what bothered me was not the spectacle of bad work, of which there's always plenty around. Instead, the problem had to do with good work that still didn't seem as good as it could have been, art that engaged my interest but left me unsatisfied. "What's wrong," I kept asking myself. "What's the problem?" My silent answer was, repeatedly, "This work is academic." Or rather, "There's something academic in this work."

But I didn't trust this answer. It came to me intuitively, but when I stopped to think about it, I realized that I didn't really understand what it meant. What, today, would count as academic in art? From one point of view, almost everything: Artists are for the most part products of the higher education system, professionally trained masters (that is, MFAs). Like conservatory-trained musicians, they are the successful output of an implicitly hierarchical system. That's what made it possible for Lincoln Kirstein, an early supporter of New York's Museum of Modern Art who nevertheless adored academic drawing and eventually parted ways with the museum, to decry what he in 1948 called "a modern Abstract Academy that, like its other academic predecessors, now wins prizes in eminently respectable national salons." But his *tu quoque* hardly gets at the kind of "academic" I was thinking of, and for that matter, it's not the kind that bothers me. Too much art that I value has emerged from this academic system for me to dismiss it. So at least in this sense of the word, I can't accede to Clement Greenberg's dictum that "all kitsch is academic; and conversely, all that's academic is kitsch."

What I had in mind when the voice in my head told me there was something academic about what I was seeing was something much more specific and something deeper rooted. A widespread complaint about today's art schools is that they no longer teach traditional skills and merely inculcate their students with various strands of theory. But the generalization doesn't hold; it's quite true of some schools, not at all of others. And don't forget that there are outliers like the New York Academy of Art, which, according to its mission statement, aims to impart traditional—that is, premodernist—methods and techniques as means for producing "vital contemporary art" that is "figurative and representational."

So what counts as good painting in that kind of academy? I asked a friend who's a teacher in one of them, and his response was that at the core, it's about an anatomically correct reconstruction of the body: "Well, knowledge of and care for anatomy I think is a must, if not full mastery of it. That has to be conveyed in the work, even if only part of the body is depicted. This attentiveness comes across in the face, hands, joints, etc. That stuff can't be faked. The San Francisco Bay painters [Richard Diebenkorn in his figurative phase of the 1950s and '60s, David Park] were figurative but stopped short of rendering anatomy. Same with Fairfield Porter, who thought anatomy was scientific; same with Alice Neel and Alex Katz. None care about articulating anatomical form as a value in itself (although Katz sure knows anatomy)."

This started to help me make sense of my unease with some of the new figurative painting I've been seeing. For me, Neel and Katz are exemplary figures, necessary reference points for any painter who wants to paint contemporary life in a contemporary way, just as much as Picasso or Matisse, who said in 1913, "Now I draw according to my feelings, not according to anatomy." And likewise, when I think of today's midcareer painters who've made something important out of the figurative tradition—Marlene Dumas and Luc Tuymans, as well as Eisenman and Marshall—they are artists who (however well they may have learned traditional anatomy in school) submit the image of the body to the demands of the painting itself rather than conceive of it as something that already exists in itself and that the painting has to accommodate by way of codified rules.

Now it seems that many young painters want to draw back from this quintessentially modernist approach, to find some more secure grounding in an authoritative way of conveying the sense of a human presence. But too often and surprisingly, I feel more heavily the presence of the old academic strictures. This is not necessarily obvious at first glance. Often enough, there's a more up-to-date stylistic filigree wrapped around the work's academic core. And often, too, it's enlivened by contemporary subject matter, registering the lives and feelings of people—communities of color, queer communities—who were ignored by classical European painting. One commentator, Harrison Tenzer, made the suggestion that queer artists, rather than rebelling against traditions formerly seen as

exclusionary, as did many of those active at the height of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, are simply choosing what suits them from a menu of art historical possibilities, just as they now feel free “to choose what aspects of the dominant social order, such as marriage and child-rearing, they want in their lives.”



Doron Langberg's *By the Window*, 2019. (Courtesy of Yossi Milo Gallery)

That's a plausible comparison, but it doesn't succeed in getting rid of my unease in front of some of the work by some of today's new figure painters. Take Doron Langberg, who recently showed at Yossi Milo Gallery in Manhattan. Born in Israel in 1985, he was educated at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (one of the strongholds of traditional art education), the University of Pennsylvania, and then at Yale University. He now lives in New York. He is a painter of great bravura. From his work, it's easy to see that he is intoxicated by the seemingly limitless range of painterly mark-making available to him—and for the viewer to be intoxicated by it in turn. In the show at Yossi Milo, “Likeness,” this was most true of *By the Window* (2019), which simply shows a young man in shorts and a T-shirt sitting in a room that is somehow both described in detail (we note the contrast between the antique look of the bow back Windsor side chair in front of the man and the heavy wooden table behind him, on the one hand, and the Venetian blinds rather than curtains covering the window, almost suggestive of an office space, on the other) yet mostly abstracted, with forms that seem to deliquesce alongside more carefully rendered ones and heated-up, mostly translucent color that keeps wanting to burst into lyrical flame. The figure, although near the center of the painting, is an almost recessive presence, seemingly overwhelmed by the room in which he sits. (See how his bare legs almost disappear in the glaring light.) He's depicted by the artist from an unusual angle, as if observed from a superior height, and with his lowered eyes and hands penitentially folded in his lap, apparently brooding.

It's a paradox: Whoever this painting is of (and the painting is fairly unusual in Langberg's depictions of single figures in not offering a name in the title) is apparently the least significant part of the composition—or at least you feel that he would like to be, that he'd rather be hiding—and yet his being there holds it together. Without him, the painting would be just an anthology of beautifully painted but unrelated fragments; it would fall apart. That contradiction is what gives *By the Window* its power, but Langberg is rarely so willing to subordinate the figure this way. In particular, a number of smaller head-and-shoulder portraits miss out on the kind of psychological charge that *By the Window* carries because the treatment of the face seems almost too straightforwardly descriptive while the rest of the picture devolves into a sort of free play quite independent of the more empirical attention given to the head. Instead of the tension that animates *By the Window*, these seem riven by a simple self-contradiction—as though the artist were making himself the servant of two masters. He's following two distinct ideas of how presence can be manifest in painting: a classical idea that it is reconstructed

through representation and a modernist idea that color or perhaps paint itself asserts its own autonomous presence, not descriptive of anything else. The ideas are neither reconciled nor put into productive conflict but simply juxtaposed.

Probably Langberg is best judged, for now, not on those smaller studies of individuals but on his more elaborate compositions with many figures. A few are sexually very explicit—*Zach and Craig* (2019) with two men enjoying a rim job, for instance—but most show groups of people just hanging out together. They are what used to be called conversation pieces, such as *Daniel Reading* (2019), with its bird’s-eye view of five people sitting around in a living room dominated by a rug whose patterned colors are almost psychedelically intense. Some of the figures seem to melt into the space, like the man toward the back, stretched out in front of some bookshelves, while others, like the woman in front of him, are described in a more full-bodied way, but one feels that the figures have been separately placed rather than that they are really together in the same room.



TM Davy's 635, 2019. (Courtesy of Van Doren Waxter)

That’s why—although most commentators on Langberg’s work have put the accent on a sense of intimacy, and it’s encouraged by the paintings’ titles being on a first-name basis with their subjects—intimacy is exactly what I find too often lacking. The academic study of the figure on which he relies makes it hard not to portray his characters, drawn from a wide circle of friends and lovers and sometimes quite recognizable to denizens of the New York art world, as utterly separate and self-contained entities. The academic body is cold, essentially a certificate (as the art historian Kenneth Clark once put it) of professional capacity. Maybe that’s why Langberg has to generate so much heat from the high-keyed colors with which he renders the space his people inhabit: to warm up his chilly people.

TM Davy, whose exhibition “This Marram” took place at Van Doren Waxter, was similar in subject matter to Langberg’s, though less adventurous in technique. The two painters are even characters in each other’s work. Langberg’s *TM in the Meat Rack* (2018) depicts Davy in a cruising area on New York’s Fire Island—the setting for all the works in “This Marram” (marram being a kind of grass that grows on sandy beaches), while it’s presumably Langberg who one sees from behind in Davy’s *Doron Looking at the Ocean* (2019). The dozens of small pastel and gouache paintings on paper that made up the show, lined up unframed, nearly edge to edge, include close-ups of the grass and skylines but are mainly studies of people, singly or in groups. As with Langberg, what seems important here is not so much any particular individual but the idea of depicting a community of friends and lovers. But again, as with Langberg, portraiture, whether individual or collective, seems the least urgent thing going on in these works. Especially when they’re seen in such quantity, Davy’s essentially conventional idea of the figure—of its form, of its presence—becomes banal, though to some extent, the works are rescued by the way he allows himself to be more playful and specific with the atmosphere around the body. Isn’t it strange that he seems

to love what he does with a moon or a sunset more than what he can do with a beautiful young human body? Well, maybe not so strange if he too readily accepts outdated canons for how the body should be depicted. In fact, he's at his best when seemingly furthest from any kind of representation at all, in the works that give the show its name, the paintings of marram, which might have seemed, in another context and without the titles, pure abstractions, though their delicacy of touch and energy of movement suggests the artist was no more yoking himself to the example of any abstractionist's work than he was trying to limn the precise forms of the windblown grasses. He found his freedom in his distance from conventions of representation and abstraction both.

A few months ago, writing about "The Young and Evil" at the David Zwirner Gallery, an exhibition looking at Kirstein's circle of queer magic realist painters of the 1930s and '40s, I was impressed by the way their work rendered what I saw as "the fluidity and heterogeneity of the desire and intimacy that permeated the private worlds of these artists" and noted its timeliness, thanks to the pursuit by so many younger artists today of a space for intimacy in their work. Langberg and Davy might have been just the ones I had in mind (though I didn't know their work then). And while Langberg's and Davy's debt to the old-fashioned academic nude is not as blatant as Paul Cadmus's or Jared French's, being generously swathed in modernist improvisation, it's no longer the strict either/or it might have seemed in Kirstein's day. And it's significant, I think, that many of the works in "The Young and Evil" were private in nature—sketches and studies never meant to be seen in public—and for that reason more touching than the same artists' often too rhetorical work for exhibition.

To my eye, the dependence on the academic method (now perhaps even unconscious, in any case not definitively marked) remains just as inhibiting a factor for contemporary painting as it was when artists like Matisse and Picasso, de Kooning and Dubuffet were finding far different ways of expressing their feelings toward the figure than classicism ever could have envisioned. In Kirstein's day, a residual classicism at least represented a certain intransigence, but today, especially when mixed in with more modern techniques, it serves mainly the longing for an ingratiating relatability, and while it demonstrates a level of skill that can't be faulted, it presents no challenge to the artist's insight or to the viewer's judgment. Can the sculptural volume of the classical body be reconciled with modernist flatness and the materiality of paint as substance, as Langberg and, more cautiously, Davy seem to be trying to do? Maybe, but not as long as classicism continues to represent a certificate of skill, of submission to the authority of a tradition that no longer holds.



Amy Sherald's *Handsome*, 2019. (Photo by Joseph Hyde / Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth)

You wouldn't immediately think of Amy Sherald as an upholder of the classical figure. Sherald, who only a couple of years ago shot to fame for her official portrait of Michelle Obama, seems to have gone all in for a more graphic

sense of form than more overtly traditional figure painters like Davy and Langberg, one based on contour without volume. One would guess her lineage stems from Katz by way of Barkley Hendricks. It's clear, too, that the basis for her imagery lies in photography rather than in drawing from the model. She even underlines this by painting her subjects' faces in grisaille, giving her paintings an edge of nostalgia, as if they were black-and-white photographs, colorized. But in a recent interview with *The Brooklyn Rail*, she credits the traditionalist painter Bo Bartlett as an inspiration and, even more surprisingly, reveals that she studied with Odd Nerdrum, the self-proclaimed kitsch artist of Norway.

Sherald's recent exhibition "The Heart of the Matter..." at Hauser & Wirth was her first big show in New York City—her only previous solo outing there was a brief pop-up sponsored by a Chicago gallery—and featured eight large paintings, all portraits. In contrast to the familiarity proposed by Langberg and Davy, with their subjects introduced by first name, Sherald presents her subjects in a formal manner. She depicts, not a gallery of friends, but a gallery of people who are united by being, like her, black. In most of the paintings, the unnamed subjects, surrounded by a single bright color, stand right in the middle of the canvas looking straight out. Their names are not given. Instead, the paintings have evocative titles, whether terse (*Handsome*, 2019) or prolix (*When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be [Self-imagined atlas]*, 2018)—titles that give less emphasis to the person's individuality than to the idea that each one represents something beyond him- or herself, a principle or poetic truth. A couple of the works have slightly more complicated compositions and an eerie formality that puts me in mind of certain works of Hughie Lee-Smith, a somewhat forgotten artist who was unusual in his time (he died in 1999 at the age of 83) as one of the few black practitioners of magic realism. *Precious jewels by the sea* (2019) shows two couples on the sand next to a beach umbrella and basket—for once, an almost realistic setting; the women sit on the men's shoulders. *If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it* (2019) shows a man, dressed not at all like a construction worker, sitting atop a beam of an unfinished building, facing the viewer but with his body turned away as he sits with legs hanging over the other side of the beam. It's the only painting I've seen of Sherald's in which she suggests that her characters' self-possession is not based on balance, on symmetry.

Indeed, there's something brittle about the clarity and frontality of Sherald's other paintings. I keep feeling that she's being too careful, that she's not taking any chances. Yes, the paintings are reassuringly solid, and yet one feels their solidity is more precarious than it seems. Arguably, this is just realism, given that Sherald's paintings are portraits of African-Americans at a time when the force of white supremacy seems stronger than ever. But I can't help seeing it differently, as the work of a painter who cares too much about getting it right, about not losing control of the pictorial space she's created for herself—another example of the surprising reflux of academic correctness in today's figurative painting, so long after we'd assumed it was no longer an issue. It's still a temptation worth resisting.