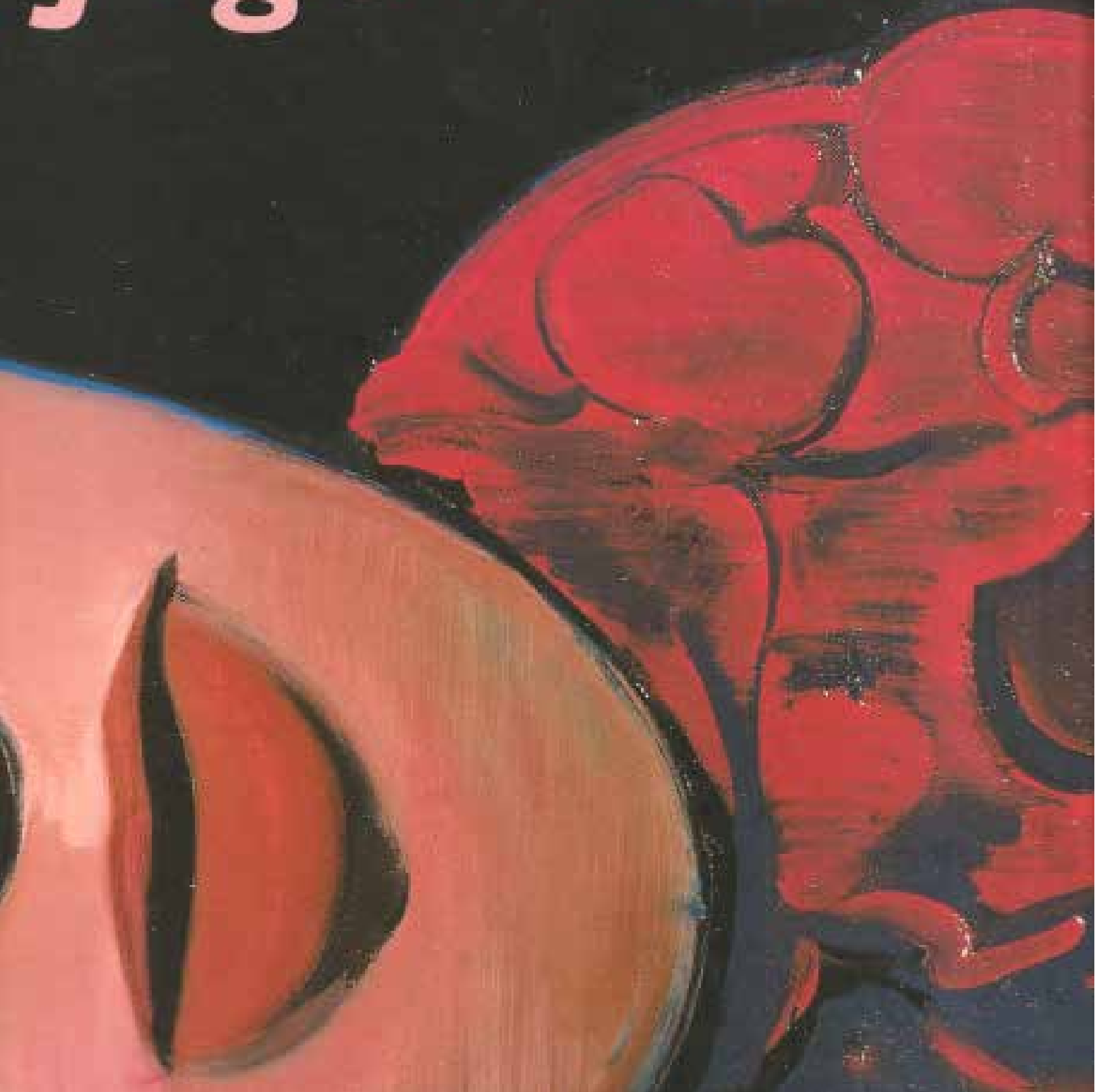


figuration



Ursula Blickle Stiftung, Kraichtal

Museion

Museum für moderne Kunst, Bozen

Rupertinum

Museum für moderne und zeitgenössische Kunst
Salzburger Landessammlungen

figuration

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to remain anonymous

Foreword

Those who have a reasonably clear picture of the current art scene will have noticed an increasingly clear tendency toward figuration among many young painters. The original working title for this exhibition was "Figuration: Outsiders or Trends?" Although we have since abandoned that title, it seems appropriate to recall its existence at the outset of this project, for such artists as Lucien Freud, the early David Hockney and, above all, the venerable, still quite active Balthus, were outsiders by virtue of their interest in figurative art and portraiture during the 1960s and 1970s.

The present international exhibition brings an elder and a middle-aged generation together with a younger one. The selection was deliberately focused upon portraits and nudes – to fundamental forms of figuration itself, that is – in order to provide a reliable basis for comparison. Figuration does not mean representation alone; it is rather an approach to painting the body that does not imply a return to orthodox realism. For the most part, it is painting based upon photography. The invention of photography changed painting significantly, just as the ascendancy of photography as a mimetic medium continues to influence painting today. Contemporary painting relates to a broad spectrum of media strategies ranging from billboard posters, advertising and film to still photography and art history. On the other hand, this kind of painting in its media context involves an insistent probing of the portrait and the body. This exhibition is motivated primarily by the conviction that, in spite of the media diversification obvious in contemporary art and the various "crossovers" we note, painting – so often given up for dead – still manages to generate new and interesting positions again and again. Moreover, figuration responds to a yearning for sensualism in painting and to its fascination with slow-moving images.

This exhibition, realized through the initiative of the Ursula Blickle Foundation, would not have been possible without the excellent cooperative efforts of the three institutions represented by the undersigned in three different European countries or without the spontaneous willingness of many artists and lenders to take part in the project. It is first and foremost the achievement of two curators – Dr. Andreas Hapkemeyer (Museion) and Professor Peter Weiermair (Rupertinum), who chose the artists exhibited here. We wish to express our heartfelt thanks to all of the employees of the three institutions involved in the organization of the exhibition.

Ursula Blickle
Blickle Foundation, Kraichtal

Pier Luigi Siena
Museion, Bolzano

Professor Peter Weiermair
Rupertinum, Salzburg

“In the movie *Samson said to Delila ...*”

Andreas Hapkemeyer

“When you choose a subject that someone else might consider banal, then the picture must be taken seriously as a painting and not because of its message or content.” Despite the presence of motifs in his painting, the New York artist Alex Katz draws our attention to the eminent role of painting in his work with this statement. Born in 1927, Katz, whose own unique approach developed in parallel to Pop Art but was pursued entirely independent of it in a continuous line from the 1950s to the present, has attracted increasing interest among European critics and younger artists in recent years. Katz’s expansive paintings – almost always of people, often members of his family – are executed in direct eye-to-eye contact with his subjects. In recent years, he has added landscapes and seascapes to his repertoire as well. Katz’s gaze has always been influenced by photography, by images from advertising, movies and magazines; his aim is to present a new view of the world, although he not focus on the world of advertising and commercial goods to which Pop Art was so strongly attracted.

Katz, like such figures as David Hockney, Chuck Close and Franz Gertsch, belongs to the generation of artists sixty years of age and older, which he represents – along with Paula Rego (*1935), a native Portuguese artist now living in London who may be placed in the tradition of a Lucian Freud – in this exhibition devoted to the art of recent years. “Figuration” features primarily artists born since the late 1940s and early 1950s and also includes a number of considerably younger painters. It goes without saying that the group of artists presented here is only one of several possible selections and that other names could easily be added. With the exception of Markus Muntean and Adi Rosenblum (both *1962), whose aesthetic concepts involve the use of different media, all of the artists shown here are painters. The objective in making the selection was to present a number of representative positions while avoiding duplication to the extent possible. The most notable common denominator shared by all of the artists gathered together here is that they have chosen, in lieu of the kind of Expressionist or mythical figuration that became widespread during the 1980s, the now commonly rejected approach of highly realistic representation, with its historical links to New Objectivity, to the painting of the Novecento, to American Realism and Photorealism, while developing entirely unique forms with unmistakable origins in the present at the same time. Another qualification must be made with respect to the work of Michael Triegel, an artist born in Erfurt in 1968, who deliberately elevates the consolidation of positions from New Objectivity, Surrealism, German and Italian Renaissance painting and Mannerism to the level of a stylistic principle in

a body of work in which the figural painting typical of the art of the former GDR continues to play an underlying role. In contrast, Hubert Schmalix (*1952) exemplifies a painter whose course can be traced from the neo-Expressionist figuration of the 1980s to new forms of realism.

Indicative of the growing pains experienced by artists born in the 1950s and later is a remark made by Robert Feintuch (*1953), a native of New Jersey. Although it cannot be applied categorically to the European situation, Feintuch's comment does tell us a great deal: "By the time I got to New York, abstraction had become an institutional language and ruled in the galleries and art schools. Minimalism was still in the air, and the (unspoken) ban on painting pictures probably made figural art attractive to me. So many things seemed to be forbidden at the time – it was as if artists were living on a solitary island ruled by a fundamentalist-iconoclastic regime." Incidentally, a memory of Feintuch's past as an abstract painter is preserved in the flat backgrounds and undergrounds of his paintings, which call to mind the totally illuminated backgrounds of fashion photography.

One important characteristic of the various positions presented here is an indirect approach to reality in a view filtered by different media. "I belong to a generation that grew up with movies and television. My sense of figuration comes from there: Making paintings comes from making films," says Eric Fischl (*1948) about his painting, which remained devoted to the abstract well into the 1970s. Fischl uses photographs he has taken himself as the basis for paintings. The photograph is the starting point for a painting process that has engendered a strikingly uninhibited and lively brushwork style in the paintings of the last few years, although the photographic source is seldom forgotten completely. His paintings, whose motifs are often erotic, have been referred to as "voyeuristic" by some; in placing figures in space they suggest – in the manner of a film still – the presence of stories, but the tales are never told.

Highly revealing is an inscription added by Marlene Dumas (*1953) to her 1996 painting *Delila*, which is not shown at the exhibition: "In the movie Samson said to Delila: who are you? and she said who do you want me to be?" The words clearly indicate that the painted scene refers to a movie. The subject portrayed is an actress whose image is fixed in a film still. The point of departure for the painting is not a natural model but a photographic image of a fictional character. The allusion to the world of media, to the media-

generated image of the human being that tends to impose itself between every direct perception – in Dumas' case they are primarily images of women expressive of gender-specific role expectations – is a very contemporary phenomenon explored by the artist through the traditional medium of painting. It is precisely this ambivalence between her expressive painting style and the evidence of a photographic source that gives the works of Marlene Dumas their special appeal.

The media world as a new reality in its own right or as an integrating component of today's world is a central theme for a number of younger artists in particular, and it has a profound influence on their feelings about life and the worlds in which they live. Images from pornographic films or detective movies, snapshots taken on drives through the city (New York), from parties, discotheques or interior scenes in young people's apartments – these are the subjects treated in the brilliant, fleeting imagery of Daniele Galliano's (*1961) painting, which nevertheless preserves the spirit of the original photographic source. Like photography, this kind of painting permits access to a living reality that is either enriched or fractured through the medium of painting and its inherent laws. Gian Franco Montesano (*1949) also begins with photographs, but the photographic image serves him, in contrast, as a means of access to the past, be it his own or a collective (social, political) history. Following a phase in which he worked primarily with traditional religious motifs during the late 1970s, he began to focus systematically on historical subjects in the early 1980s. Accordingly, many of his paintings are in black-and-white. The occasional shift to color not only emphasizes a particular figure but retrieves it from the past, updating it, so to speak. He is not concerned with the relationship between painting and photography as a theme, however, as he regards photos as a perfectly natural source of images from which the contemporary painter may freely draw. Titles play an important role in the interpretation of Montesano's paintings. Each title suggests the beginning of a story and thus sets a narrative sequence in motion.

The equal importance of thematic and formal issues is also emphasized by artists who – like Gotthard Bonell (*1953) and Bas Meerman (*1970) – work directly from models without recourse to photographic sources. Bonell's primary theme – apart from his psychologically oriented portraiture – is the erotic, which he seeks to evoke in various mixed forms comprising elements of the nude, the still life and the landscape. The boundaries between these traditional genres are eliminated. There is no longer a funda-

mental difference between body, object and landscape. Eroticism and confinement are closely related in Bonell's world of images. His concern with the formal aspects of painting itself – in his differing use of black or of diverse surface qualities – is the inevitable counterpart of theme. The artist himself has compared painting with the opera, in which content and musical expression are inseparably bound together.

Bas Meerman writes that his central theme is love. He approaches his very personal and therefore unique experience of love (and loneliness) through the resources of painting provided to him by history. He is well aware that "every brushstroke one carries out has already been made before." Yet he does not regard the practice of drawing from the tradition of painting as a disadvantage, seeing it instead as an opportunity. The truly unique emerges in his work through his investigation of his own concrete reality near the end of the 20th century. The reality of life confronted by an artist like Meerman is not a vague, generalized human condition but a very special, personal one, and thus he represents an important segment of current art. The specific realities of the lives of fringe groups – homosexuals, Blacks, members of a specific social class at a specific place (Jews in New York, Turks in Germany or Asians in the US, for example, but also women under certain circumstances) – has been a major focus of interest among artists in recent years.

The portrait plays a role of central significance in figural painting. Although it has experienced perhaps more difficulty in justifying itself after the invention of photography than any other genre, it now enjoys greater vitality than ever before. This exhibition features a number of artists for whom the portrait is a central concern: the Chinese artist Yan Pei-Ming (*1960), who now lives in Paris, the English painters Elizabeth Peyton (*1965) and Massimo Raho (*1971), the German artist Till Friewald (*1963) and the Austrians Xenia Hausner (*1951) and Josef Kern (*1953).

Yan Pei-Ming, who painted propaganda posters as a young man in China, has also done a number of landscapes in recent years. Yet his interest has always focused primarily on the human image, to which he pursues two different lines of approach: painting heads without reference to a model and others based upon models. Regardless of possible similarities, his human figures alternate between individual and collective images. In explaining this tension between individuality and generalization, the artist cites his

roots in Communist China, where individualism is regarded as socially unacceptable. His striking, expansive style characterized by the use of a broad brush give his paintings a certain photographic quality.

Photographs also play an important role in the portraits of Elizabeth Peyton and Massimo Raho. Although their work differs in many ways, these remarks apply directly to Peyton, as representative of both artists. Her models are based upon existing sources, including images from newspapers, video clips or young men painted from her own photos – usually highly style-conscious, androgynous and dandified figures. In this way, she reverses the traditional roles of painter and model. Although they are painted from photos, Peyton's pictures exhibit emphatically painterly qualities such as clearly visible brushstrokes, a wet-in-wet technique and accentuated coloration. Her portraits often feature stars (Kurt Cobain, Leonardo DiCaprio and others appear frequently) or friends who look like stars in a number of different variations. Many people have recognized affinities to Warhol in her representations of celebrities and pop icons, and she has admitted that his influence on her work is significant. Despite the apparent similarities, Peyton is not concerned with depersonalization or mass production, however, but with capturing very specific existential moments of intensity in life. It is important for her to arrest the passage of life's time with the aid of the painted image. And she is surely concerned with depicting a lifestyle that appears to refer back, with a certain lascivious glance, to the early years of this century. The intimacy of her approach is evident in the particularly small formats.

Aspects of psychology play a role in the work of Freiwald, Hausner and Kern – albeit in very different ways. Freiwald paints the faces of his contemporaries, thus developing a picture of his times. At the same time, his Minimalist reduction to the frontal view (as in the photographs of Ruff or Struth) and his extremely sensitive glazing technique on watercolors give the paintings a certain aura of timelessness. Only the small paintings are executed in the presence of a model. Freiwald does his large formats from memory. For the artists, painting from memory means reconstructing a person's most important features. These reconstructed images, which bear the psychological imprint of the rememberer and the remembered, produced paintings that appear characterized by a dreamlike sense of distance, which is intensified by the transparency of the watercolor technique. While his portraits reveal individual features, they call to mind the multiple-exposure photos used to produce idealized images or typical, average faces. The psychologi-

cal dimension, which takes on such importance in the works of Xenia Hausner and Josef Kern, becomes secondary to generalization. Freiwald's constant repetition of images of the same model and his practice of painting from memory suggest that this artist is more concerned with the process of painting than with subject matter. What makes his paintings typical of their time is the fact that Freiwald – like many of his fellow artists – seeks to achieve synthesis between issues of figuration and pure painting.

The psychologies of their subjects appear to play a very significant role in the paintings of the two Austrian artists Xenia Hausner and Josef Kern. Both exhibit a certain tendency to be unforgiving in their treatment of their models, and neither is easily categorized. Indeed, it is even difficult to classify them chronologically. This may have to do with the fact that both artists paint from nature. There are no photographic sources that would help in assigning works to specific periods. In Hausner's paintings, with their vigorously animated coloration and brushwork, the artist's living contact with his subjects remains in evidence. Aspects of art history play a part as well, as if a historical filter had been placed over the figures. The dramatic quality of her painting reflects not only the influence of turn-of-the-century Austrian Expressionism but her own previous work as a stage designer as well. "Portrait sittings are as breathtaking as theater performances," the artist remarks. Accordingly, her portraits are staged scenes, arrangements of figures in space. The fact that Kern frequently paints either himself or his model Wolfgang Graninger in countless variations is an indication of both his concern with an in-depth treatment of a theme and of his desire to approach the theme in a number of different ways through painting. One of Kern's objectives is to deny identification with any fashion, school or other tendency and to avoid establishing a prominent and thus easily recognizable identity. Instead, he strives to paint soberly and without embellishment in an effort to discover something as unspectacular as the truth. What perhaps distinguishes Kern and Hausner from some of the other painters presented here is the fact that they still believe, in a very old-fashioned way, in a direct approach to reality, to objects and people.

The work of Marco Neri (*1968) occupies quite a different position – a position that marks the outer limits of the theme presented at the exhibition. Unlike those of the other artists represented here, most of his paintings are based neither on photographic nor on real sources. Neri is interested in the representation of ideas and ideals – of people, of landscapes and of living spaces. His paintings are archetypal im-

ages, in a certain sense, in which Neri seeks to probe deeply hidden areas in the consciousness of his viewers. The object is not naturalistic representation but the revelation of psychic spaces, the creation of which Neri – in opposition to what he himself regards as a widespread tendency towards superficiality – sees as the real obligation of the painter, one that cannot be met through any other medium in this world.

Canvas paintings and the human being as the object of art: As it relates to the use of new media, realistic painting appears quite conservative at first glance (Hubert Schmalix discusses this issue in his catalogue statement). And there is something to be said for that assumption. In contrast to the tendency toward the philosophical justification and intellectual celebration of all conceivable technological and genetically determined changes in humankind in the digital age, attention is drawn once again to the human being and the age-old needs with which he still finds himself faced in what is, admittedly, a radically different environment. The seemingly conservative quality of these paintings lies in the understanding that the human being – regardless of technology – is still the focal point of interest. Human positions and problems and the questions that arise in the attempt to render the human image in art are important to artists. “The concept of figural painting today has its origin in the recognition that the human being still exists and that he exists in a real and not merely a virtual sense,” writes Xenia Hausner. And, she adds, “. . . the painting of people today (can be) explained as a response to the disappearance of people in the information society.” Figural painting, a kind of painting that focuses on the human being, assigns primary importance to the human being. However, it is no longer the “human being in general” that matters but the very concrete human lives of women and men who belong to specific groups and live under specific circumstances at specific places. What unites the positions presented here, despite the many differences in which we recognize the diversity and vitality of figural painting today, is not so much a common formal approach – the use of photographs and other sources. To the extent that they use photographs, artists are no longer concerned primarily with exploring the relationship between the original and the painted image or the principle of translating an image into different media. Photography, film, video technology and television are dominant influences in contemporary reality and, as such, have their place in figural painting. There is something quite natural about using photography. It is no longer questioned as a foundation for painting. As a source it is as natural and real as the objects we perceive directly before our eyes.

In contrast to photography, these painted pictures deal with both subject content and issues of relevance to painting alone, aspects related only to the medium itself. All of the artists are well aware that painting cannot be devoted to formal innovation alone. The need to separate painting from all subject matter postulated by modern artists and their demand for complete autonomy in a form of art developed solely on the basis of its own laws is negated here, although in a way that differs substantially from that of Gerhard Richter, who claims at least theoretical indifference with respect to the themes with which he deals. Painting is important to the younger painters, but so is subject matter as well. The conviction that an endless variety of current and meaningful works can be achieved by bringing approaches and techniques that may have been used before to bear on special segments of current reality is a significant factor in their art.

Gotthard Bonell

Marlene Dumas

Robert Feintuch

Eric Fischl

Till Friewald

Daniele Galliano

Xenia Hausner

Alex Katz

Josef Kern

Bas Meerman

Yan Pei-Ming

Gian Marco Montesano

Markus Muntean / Adi Rosenblum

Marco Neri

Elizabeth Peyton

Alessandro Raho

Paula Rego

Hubert Schmalix

Michael Triegel

Robert Feintuch

By the time I arrived in New York, abstraction had become an institutional language that dominated the galleries and schools. Minimalism was still in the air and the prohibition against painting images probably made working figuratively more appealing to me. So much seemed prohibited then – it was as if artists lived on an isolated island governed by a fundamentalist iconoclastic regime.

I always saw that abstraction offered tremendous possibilities, but when I looked back through history, the loss of the image seemed like a terrible loss.

Along with many artists of my generation, I was deeply affected by watching the change in Philip Guston's work. I loved the abstract paintings, but as he moved to the figuration, his work began to speak much more directly and specifically. Those late paintings of his are so lifelike – grand, horrible, and ridiculous.

I'm drawn to the ways that figuration makes direct links with the world and I like the dumb magic of illusion. I also continue to be interested in abstraction. Painting seems like such an odd, anachronistic undertaking now, that I find myself much more interested in looking at individual paintings than I am in looking in ways that are broadly categorical.

*P. 28: Spill, 1998 / Change, 1998
P. 29: Himself, 1997*

