

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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and the artists and the lenders who have chosen
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

Painting after Photography

Remarks on an Exhibition Project

Peter Weltermaier

The motives underlying every theme-based or group exhibition tell us a great deal. This exhibition originally had a subtitle: "Figuration: Outsiders or Trends?" The subtitle was eventually abandoned during the preparatory phase because of the negative connotations of the term "trend" and the hint of willful eccentricism in the word "outsider."

Figurative painting today represents a strengthening tendency in painting as a form and a re-emphasis of a classical iconography. Eccentric outsiders were most prominently represented in the sixties and seventies, although their influence is still present today – a matter to which I shall return later. As we have limited our focus to painting, on the one hand, and to the classical themes of the portrait and the nude, on the other, the works exhibited at this international exhibition provide a good basis for comparison. The nineteen artists represented at this show cannot be assigned to a

simple, linear, naturalistic tradition; indeed, it is important to remember that these artists deliberately experiment with historical currents and that their themes are concerned with media contexts. The spectrum of their work ranges from a recollection of Expressionism (Hausner) and Renaissance painting (Triegel) to approaches to phenomena from the world of advertising (Katz, Freiwald), popular illustrations (Montesano), photo-novels (Muntean/Rosenblum), film (Fischl) and, above all, real or remembered photography (Dumas, Neri, Galliano, etc.). We must keep these contextual interrelationships in mind as we seek to come to terms with this kind of painting. Just as billboard painting and fashion illustrations provided inspiration for Katz's pictorial ideas, the history of painting has offered a fertile field of possibilities for Triegel.



Lucian Freud, *Naked man on a Bed*, 1989–90

Thus what we discover here is not a revival of realist tendencies or a return to orthodox realism but instead an approach to the translation of an omnipresent world of media images into painting. In the process, highly individual, emotional and even erotic motivations are allied with a newly emerging passion for sensual painting. Despite the fact that contemporary painters have ready, simultaneous access to all visual media and often employ them in parallel, producing a number of intriguing hybrid forms, painting, a medium so often given up for dead, continues to evoke considerable fascination. As in the eighties, the re-emergence of figural paintings also involves a "yearning for pictures." As fragmented as this world of images may be, it still "reflects the attempt to escape the fundamental loneliness of life" (Meerman). Despite many instances of ironic twists and sophisticated translations of photography into painting, this yearning for the other, whether in the form of a nude or a portrait, also amounts to a form of communication. The fleeting images of film, television and photography are arrested, slowed down and sensually intensified through the medium of painting.

Peter Weibel argues quite rightly with reference to this kind of painting as a translation of photography that, since the emergence of photography, modes of photographic behavior and vision – the photographic condition (Rosalind Krauss), that is – have shaped the parameters of painting, the modes of behavior and vision in painting. One is inclined to assume that the portrait and the nude, the genres most heavily represented at our exhibition, have finally established themselves as themes in photography and other technical imaging media and that such artists as Balthus, Freud or Hockney represent only the last of the eccentric outsiders at the end of figurative painting. All



Balthus, „Die Gitarrenstunde“
(La Leçon de guitare), 1934

three of these painters, as the artists' statements make clear, had an influence on the younger generation – Balthus, the eldest of the three, through his deliberately anti-modernist stance, Hockney through his willingness to engage in dialogue with photography and Freud through his exhibitionistic and unusually intense focus on the body as flesh.

Peter Weibel has referred to the artist as a cartographer charting the terrain between photography and painting. This strikes me as an apt metaphor that supports the concept of painting from photography. In the early years of the modern period, photography exerted a decisive influence on the course painting was to take, and the painting exhibited at this exhibition by no means reflects a naive return to a historical, 19th-century position. Indeed, it is a kind of painting that deals deliberately with photography and with all of the by-products of the photographic technical

image. Thus I find the artists' statements printed in this catalogue particularly interesting in light of this explanation of the enormous influence of photographic images.



David Hockney, *The Room, Tarzana*, 1967

Elizabeth Peyton cites David Hockney's anti-modernist posture and his decision to ignore prevailing fashions. This attitude, assumed at the height of modernism, and Hockney's carefree approach strengthened her own resolve with regard to artistic decisions. We find a similar tendency in the work of Robert Feintuch. The anecdote about a Surrealist painter who came to a sudden stop amidst the paintings at a Balthus exhibition in Paris and cried out in consternation, "But it's

representational!”, is quite revealing, as the same anecdote could be told with reference to a number of the artists at this exhibition.

I do not believe that figuration has emerged from the cyclical rhythm of fashion, change and the co-existence of stylistic schools or the periodic revival of diverse forms of a current of a kind of art referred to as representational. Nor does figuration owe its existence solely to a fundamental anti-modernist posture. Despite the sensuality of its medium, it has grown forth primarily from a conceptual context. The painting of today relates to the everyday world of photography in our society. Yet it presupposes not only an understanding of photography but a knowledge of art history as well, to which several artists allude.

That painting is a sensual exercise, a translation of sensual experience through the hand to the painting, becomes evident in the work of such artists as Gotthard Bonell, Xenia Hausner and Yan Pei-Ming. Through Freud, Bonell has achieved the freedom to look at models in a completely new way. In his concept of figuration as well, the distinction between the body as an object of painting and painting itself as an object is viewed as radically, indispensably and existentially relevant.

In the work of both Hausner and Bonell we encounter a kind of painting that is not based upon a model image of the world but it instead represents work from a source. Xenia Hausner’s approach involves a painstaking, time-consuming work process. Bonell’s focus is on unusual angles of view and revelations. The relationships between the artists to the models or sources of the paintings featured at this exhibition are highly diverse. They range from the traditional painter-model relationship, which Josef Kern reverses by becoming the nude model for his own paintings, to the use of remembered photographic images as “models.” While some of the works are images of images incorporating the soft-focus of video stills or rough matrix images from tabloids, others are expressive representations of real models executed in sittings lasting for several days.

The categories of the portrait and the nude were the domain of photography for many, many years. This exhibition documents the revival of these themes in painting.

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*





