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“I Don’t Go to Crisis Just Yet”: Four Painters Discuss the Rise of Figurative Painting

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What’s the fuss about the new representation? A recent spate of articles and exhibitions have addressed the new representational painting – some generously, others less, all clamoring to make sense of a return to the figurative that feels blurred by art historical baggage and market forces. John Yau argued that recent figurative work (by Angela Dufresne and Louis Fratino) had broken with convention in a manner “more radical” than recent Conceptual art. Donald Kuspit wrote about the 20 -century dismissal of figurative art, arguing that representational paintings vie with abstraction as a significant mode of expression. He went on to note in a century, more deadly than any previous era in recorded history, Postmodern painters sought to revive figurative painting in a way that acknowledged the lived experience of bodies. Last year, Whitechapel’s Lydia Yee curated *Radical Figures: Painting in the New Millennium*, bringing together an international group of painters, who appear radical insofar as they each make paintings that don’t sit well with audiences, addressing narratives of social and political unrest, disenfranchisement and anxiety in a digital age. And just months ago, Dean Kissick wrote a polemical piece addressing “zombie figuration,” and panning much of the new figuration as bad, derivative, and lifeless (this following a similar piece by Alex Greenberger that first applied the term). Yet for all of his mudslinging, Kissick only managed to make a convincing case for market problems.

What was the larger thrust of recent analysis and reporting indicating, beyond the fact that representational painting is experiencing growing pains? Is it in crisis? In March 2021, I sat down with [Josephine Halvorson](#), [Wells Chandler](#), and [Didier William](#) for an online roundtable on recent representation in painting. Each artist employs elements of it: Halvorson paints on-site and foregrounds relationships between time, scale, and place; Chandler's expressive and playful work moves through themes of community, gender, and queerness, and uses crochet, embroidery, and drawing; and William makes multi-media paintings that address the trauma of Black and brown bodies, and the relationship between a subject and its power. We reflected on the influence of the market; how identity issues dovetail with issues of control; the ease and speed of social media and its ability to antagonize or minimize complexity in form; and what it means to represent experience in a moment of image saturation. Our takeaways were distinct, but the tone revealed a similar attitude, and there was a palpable gratitude to be together, if only remotely, to talk about painting.

Jason Stopa: The general consensus is that representational painting is having both a moment and a crisis. We witnessed a similar crisis in zombie formalism last decade. This time, there isn't a lot of agreement about what the issues are. What are your initial impressions?

Josephine Halvorson: Could you share a little bit more about what you mean by crisis? Though I think we know what you mean ...

Stopa: There have been a handful of articles in the past couple of years, a few of which have some teeth to them; Kissick has posited that figurative painting is struggling to find the language to move itself forward, and that it's aims have been co-opted by market forces. A number of artists appear to use the tropes of figurative painting: add a figure, subject, and narrative together, and you have a successful contemporary painting. It's

a lot of really interesting figurative painting happening, but there's a crisis if we're unable to distinguish between what has significance and this 'zombie' figuration.

Halvorson: Yeah, definitely. I suppose I asked what a crisis meant in this context because the rise of figurative painting doesn't seem like a crisis to me. I remember a time when there was very little figurative painting, very little painting at all. I also don't think of this as a moment, but rather part of a continuum. Even in my relatively short life, there have been robust periods of artistic exploration that endure, certainly in my mind and my experience as an artist. I don't forget them; they live on in how I think and what I make. But I'm someone who is interested in the vitality of history and, as a practitioner, don't think about painting's history as a series of moments in a linear timeline. It's been pretty exciting to see all of the different ways the figure can be expressed through painting.

Didier William: Yeah. Crisis feels a bit heavy and maybe even hyperbolic. I don't go to crisis just yet. But, considering the number of artists using the body in painting, I think the very broad sort of art-historical umbrella of "figuration" is inaccurate and insufficient. Artists are using the body in various ways, citing history, mythology, citing personal narrative, working within the realm of memorial, working within traditions of surrealism, etc. I think it's unfair to sort of lump all of those different uses of the body under one broad category of figuration. I think the market wants to do that, for sure, for the sake of economy and legibility. But I think artists are bringing so many different kinds of world experiences to what they want to do with the body in that pictorial space; we owe it to them to give a bit more generous looking where the work demands it.

It makes it harder for institutions to put easy language to it, which maybe is where the sensation of a "crisis" is coming from. Institutions and the market can't quite make it easily reducible and digestible because more

artists, from different backgrounds and different histories, are engaging with the body in a multitude of ways that give meaning and heft to the diversity of world experiences that are now part of the contemporary art landscape.

Wells Chandler: I don't think that "crisis" is too far off base. Zombie formalism was an issue of originality, and I think that there are issues of originality in figurative art. The internet and social media are partly responsible for this. Cell phones are the primary tool for looking at art and this is especially true within the last year.

These digital tools allow us as artists to absorb so much more than prior, and that has to impact what we make, whether we are consciously aware of it or not. The internet and social media have allowed for 'mashup' to be a genre of the 21st century. I used to think that originality was the most important thing in our field, but I have realized that some of the bigger players – the people who decide who gets support – do not believe this to be true. I can think of several artists who essentially make cover art of dead artists' work from not too long ago, and nobody seems to have a problem with that. I believe there is a crisis: a lack of originality.

William: I love that comment, Wells, because I think it highlights what the internet privileges, which is speed and economy, right? And consequently, that's also what the market privileges. So, in a moment where we're talking about a proliferation of figurative painting, if those two mechanisms are wielding a tremendous amount of power, some introspection or some investigation needs to be located there, too, perhaps even before we talk about what these artists are doing, right? There's an engine that is circumambulating these artists and their work and the institutions they come from, long before the artist even picks up a tool.

Halvorson: That's very interesting, what you're saying about originality, speed, and economy. When I look at this current proliferation of figurative painting, I can't not think of a time when it didn't exist, whether that was one month ago or one decade ago. I'm interested in the endurance of images and their variable durability. I wonder if, within painting, there can be a kind of resistance to momentariness, a resistance to a certain turnover speed of the market and/or online conversation – even a resistance to originality? As an artist and as a painter, I have to insist on my own definitions of time and speed.

Stopa: There was a time about a decade ago, when a quick walk in the Lower East Side revealed show after show of casual-looking abstract painting. There were several panels, articles, and museum shows dedicated to it. Times have changed. Paintings, successful paintings, take a considerable amount of time to unpack and understand. It's a medium that privileges sustained looking – the longer you look the more there is to glean. Some work even has barriers to access, and requires that we decode it. That's a positive thing: here's this thing that needs to be deconstructed, taken apart in order to kind of understand how it's working. But that decoding gets shorthanded, lately, for figurative painting – especially that by people of color. It gets filed under 'race'. Because there is a lot of work that is highly successful as an image and that traffics in how easily shareable and digestible it is, I'm curious if you feel like this is an instance of markets shaping the discourse about race? There are now several painters who are painting in the style of Barkley Hendricks, for example – Amoako Bafo, whose career has exploded.

Chandler: I don't think of Hendricks's work at all in relation to Bafo's work. I feel like they are totally different. Actually, Leon Golub comes to mind when I look at Bafo's work because of how the skin is painted.

William: Yeah. The sense of physicality and the touch I think is really different between Hendricks and Bafo ...

But I find it difficult to name an artist who makes work “about” race [who would be limited to that by their own estimation]. I was running through the names in my mind and trying to think of all these people and to put their entire project within a category of “race work” felt wildly reductive and insufficient. I think about Lynette Yiadom Boakye’s paintings, these brilliant mythological characterizations that she builds herself into and she arrives at a body that is deeply felt and present; there’s so much more in her work.

Maybe we could even think of Mickalene Thomas’s work here, too; she builds a kind of totemic body, she stacks different versions and different kinds of selves in a sort of atemporal picture plane, ending with a constructed body that crosses boundaries and crosses time and crosses geographies so much so that you can’t really fit them into a tidy conception of race or gender. The most successful artists do it from this perspective that allows them to tell you stories about who or what these people are, or what they represent or how they might function narratively or symbolically. But race becomes this sort of reductive umbrella under which we are to understand the humanity of the subjects in their paintings.

Halvorson: I agree. Those artists you mentioned, and many others working today, resist the flattening effects of categorization of making work “about race.” Their art is nuanced and enlivened by experience and imagination. And yet I understand the question because when I think of Bofo’s work, I think about his career, and the story of his astronomical rise in popularity in the market. We can speak about his paintings and their art historical relevance to Hendricks or [Alex] Katz, or to culture, such as fashion. But when we read articles about Bofo’s practice, we find ourselves reading about Bofo *himself*. There’s the representation within his work and then there’s the work of representing himself, particularly in the market context.

Stopa: I love that last statement. I think that that's part of the argument here. We are talking about cult of personality and celebrity, and how that forms around an individual – they commingle and become this other thing. Are paintings merely a reflection of the identity of the maker, as a kind of one-to-one relationship? I'm not convinced they are. I also like this idea about fashion: if they're not about a kind of racialized body that's being painted, if it's not necessarily about a relationship between maker and subject or relationship about some narrative that's being created, then maybe it is about style or fashion. Now those paintings are almost a million dollars at auction. Lynette Yiadom Boakye is different. To the untrained eye, a person would say, 'oh well, look, these are two people painting Black subjects'. But on a deeper dive, we get a very different reading. She paints these imaginary subjects and imaginary settings. They are also deeply mysterious, *as paintings*. There's a poetics at work.

William: Yeah. I mean, I think part of this question is about how we assign value to different artist practices, right? Does the market get to wield that system of power alone? Where else might it be located? Is it also located in the academy? Is it located in pop culture? Is it located in media representations adjacent to the artwork? I think it's important to know that, both as an artist and as a viewer. I also think that therein lies the capacity to really understand how race becomes operative. Because it functions differently in each of those arenas. Considering it this way forces us to stay aware of the fact that Amaoko and Lynette are both Black artists, but they're not doing the same thing at all, not engaged in the same project remotely, their individual practices deserve their discreet integrity, and that's ultimately a good thing.

Stopa: This is fun. We're getting into it. [*laughs*]

Some critical terms are now being used as market terms. Beauty was such a loaded term in the '90s. It was a term that people did not want to have

placed onto their work. And then you had critics like Dave Hickey who were trying to make a case for it. Identity is a key term that's being used today, but when we're talking about identity, I think we're usually talking about issues of power. We're also talking about issues of the gaze. While celebrating identity in a painting serves a purpose, representation can also do a number of much more interesting things: it can talk about space and audience, subject and stage. I thought maybe you could all talk about your relationship to that, about how you approach representation as a site, as a space, that's often unresolved.

Halvorson: I really like this question. I remember the discourse around beauty, how that was such a huge conversation that no one really brings up now. It seemed to me at the time that the worst thing you could do was to succumb to your own taste and make something aesthetically pleasing. Now in art school, "enjoyment" seems to be a common artistic motive and tends to garner high praise in critiques. I also remember in graduate school learning about painting's particular commodity status, that it was too digestible because of its aesthetic qualities and rarified-ness. The funny thing is, this conversation was taking place simultaneous to the subprime mortgage crisis, which, as I understand it, was caused by investing on bets—immaterial commodities. So I was scratching my head asking how an entire economy could crash when commodity was no longer coupled with materiality. That made me rethink painting's place in the market, somewhat.

It was around then that I started to think about what we now call the "experience economy." I had begun making work in relation to specific places and durations of time. How do you represent experience? How can it be embodied? These were questions that found their application through the medium of painting. For a long time, now, I have had a practice of not just looking at things, but also being looked at. This is because I typically make work out of the studio and often in public. My own body and presence is part of the work, and necessary for its creation.

William: I think the part of the question I really sort of resonate with is this space *in between* that you talk about, Jason, which for me has always been a process of trying to make images of things that I haven't seen before. Things that I've heard about, things that I've read, things that I might sort of loosely remember, things that have been inherited certainly from my parents. And I think, as someone who immigrated to this country and is sort of trying to access those lost memories, some of which are personal and individual, and some of which are cultural and collective, I'm sort of constantly trying to stitch it together into a particular kind of presence in the moment. A presence that gets rebuilt onto and literally inscribed into the painting's surface.

And so, very early for me, that meant that my relationship to representation had to make space for a kind of visual language that didn't require lived experience, but could be mythological, ahistorical, and intentionally collapse moments in time. I started to privilege visual languages that were sensual and maybe even obsessive and fetishistic. All of that seemed to align with how I experienced my own personal narrative, but also how I sort of adapted to my own role as a black person in the United States, which is an adopted relationship, right? But my relationship to my own homeland is an ancestral one. And so enmeshing those two conditions together means that I have to, in some ways, create this third space that made room for the altered form of presence that I wanted the paintings to occupy. That space was filled with the material languages of abstraction, magical realism, anecdotal and stream of consciousness storytelling, and images derived from memory that were loosely related to factual information – “loosely” either because of the failures of memory, or as a consequence of immigration. I'm trying to make space for all of those different ways of dealing with symbolism and material. I think of the transaction that's sometimes expected of representation I think of as sort of a baseline. Representation can do so

much more than that. And we've touched on that in some of the previous questions. The chasm between abstraction and representation includes so many other ways of dealing with the material world, and making space for the immaterial world, that I think it needs to be given space in our present.

Stopa: It almost sounds like there's a kind of a constellation of things that you are dealing with, Didier, where you're pulling from your personal history, ancestors, etc.

William: I think that's an imperative though, isn't it? In a sense that constellation is always at work I think, especially for Black people. I mean, I think that's how representation operates even independent of my own personal narrative. The simultaneity of what you just described is a kind of lived experience that most of us can identify with. The market impulse wants us to digest that and reduce it into something that can be a soundbite or easily and quickly understood but that's pretty far from lived experience. I think that that's where metaphor can lend a hand; that's where allegory can lend a hand; that's where mythology can lend a hand; that's where poetry can lend a hand.

Chandler: Yeah. All that really resonates with me. Complexity is really important for dealing with representation, especially if it is figurative. I like to pare things down in my work, and lately I have found that I am primarily interested in presence. I have been thinking about how to achieve this without being reductive. Minimalism has been on my mind a lot, and the fullness that I feel from spending time with a good Agnes Martin painting. I can't help but think about systemic structures that fail us and power dynamics in relation to all of this. I feel doomed to participate in games that structurally lack the boxes for me to tick off. Not that I want to be put in a box, but the complete lack of a box is an

erasure. I have found the failure of these structures to be liberating. It has caused me to look elsewhere to seek meaning and value.

Stopa: Yeah. It sounds like you have found a structure on your own terms. That's a nice segue into our last question. There are a handful of contemporary painters who make use of allegory and symbolism as a means to reckon with history. A few notable examples include [Nicole Eisenman](#)'s *Where I Was, It Shall Be* at Hauser & Wirth, [Salman Toor](#)'s *How Will I Know* at the Whitney and *Projects 110: Michael Armitage* at MoMA. There are also post-colonial issues in the work of Armitage and Toor. What about queerness in their paintings? Many of these figures, and their relationship to one another, appear fragmented. Our current hyper-mediated reality replaces an "authentic" experience of subjectivity and makes the private self a public self. Is the new "self" in painting one that no longer coheres to a logical, linear sense of place and time? What does this mean for authenticity and sincerity? Are we living in a post-ironic/post-sincere moment?

Chandler: [You know, Angela Dufresne](#) wrote this article in 2015 for *Art 21 Magazine* titled "Irony, Sincerity, is There a Third Pill"? In it, she's critical of the terms 'irony' and 'sincerity', and relates them to marketing terms when used separately. She points to trans theory, artists like Glenn Goldberg, and seeking out complexity using my favorite queer icons: mushrooms. Dufresne sums it up best, "Artworks should be as diverse and nonnormative as nature. Why do we seem to love defining opposites? What good does it do us? Mushrooms have eighteen thousand genders; how do you build, let alone practice, social norms at that party? You don't. And that's the kind of party – in some post-avant-garde, dystopian-utopian dialectic – I thought we artists were supposed to be throwing: shattering norms, forging ruptures, not seeking beginnings or ends, dredging out anarchical forms of ethics as well as perverse, unsanctioned, unverifiable meanings and returns."

William: I think the two questions are related. Because the atemporal lived reality that I think colors a lot of artists experience overlaps a queer space and a post-colonial space, right? The rub of the idea of the “Post-colonial” is that no space is actually Post-colonial, the residue of the colonial condition is still deeply embedded in contemporary life. And we’re constantly trying to sort of disentangle it and we sort of double-back on ourselves in the process of trying to do so. I don’t know that this idea of the self-existing within a logical, linear relationship to place and time is something that I and most people I know can identify with. That rather privileged space is not only mostly foreign to me, I question the value of its implied stability.

In my own sort of personal story, my family moved here and left an entire life behind—completely: aunts, uncles and cousins and other family members, many of whom passed away and some we’ve had the chance to reconnect with. And so we had to rebuild all of that, all of that family experience, which necessarily reshapes your relationship to time, and what kinds of spaces might signal “stability.” And even as an individual person you sort of have to build these kinds of systems of survival for yourself that, again, necessarily shift your relationship to the space that you occupy. To Wells’s point, in that really brilliant Dufresne quote, that’s a space that I’ve learned to consider as an imperative. Linearity is a barrier here as it is for most marginalized people. I actually think the two questions are sort of related to one another.

Halvorson: Painting is often historically and practically tied to an individual, through the use and symbol of “the hand.” It can index the self in interesting ways. But what is the relationship between the self and the individual or the self and the collective? I’m interested in all the selves that manifest through painting, specifically through touch, contact, and encounter.

Today through social media we all “tell our own stories.” Maybe because I’m not a great storyteller, or because I’m searching for more reliable narrators, I’m somewhat skeptical of the complete authority that social media promotes. I’m also skeptical of pure objectivity.

Also, in terms of the self, I’m interested in finding out who I am through making art and not weighing down creative experience with too much of who I think I am before I even begin. I like learning from my work; it seems to have a lot to teach me. When I let the painting and the process of making it guide the way, it tends to show me something that I didn’t already know. This is not easy to do.