

## The Formal Challenges of Figurative Painting

by John Goodrich on November 9, 2015



Installation view, 'Let's Get Figurative' at Nicelle Beauchene gallery (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Making sense of an overarching theme like “figuration” would seem a daunting task. Doesn't the word apply to any artwork that represents anything in the external world? But thanks to Nicelle Beauchene's capacious exhibition space and some nimble juxtapositions, *Let's Get Figurative* makes elegant order of the highly diverse work of 22 young (almost all of them under 40) painters.

In keeping with the global, pandisciplinary nature of contemporary art, these artists reside in such far-flung artistic hotspots as London, Berlin, Detroit, Chicago, San Francisco, and our own Brooklyn. They borrow from a wide variety of sources: fashion, graphic arts, comics, as well as traditions of expressionism, surrealism, and abstraction. Smaller paintings are grouped in one corner of the gallery, but overall the spacious hanging allows the exuberant effects of each work to stand out in turn.

A number of pieces combine the geometric simplifications of comics with the energy of graffiti, producing images of stylish violence or disarray. Caitlin Keogh's tidy composition features a knife-wielding hand blindly threatening from an opened hatch. A flattened design of fragmentary limbs and heads by Dustin Pevey suggests an exploded Homer Simpson cartoon. Peter Eide goes for narrational overload in a raucous, multiframe composition painted on a bath towel; this tapestry of men and goblins, variously kissing, stabbing, and devouring one another, leaves little unsaid.

More subtly, Nolan Simon's realistic rendering of a fashionably dressed business woman waiting forlornly on a bench speaks of waylaid agendas, both personal and professional. Alan Reid's delicate, virtuosic portrait of a model examines the purposes of fashion itself; the word "Brancusi" hangs from her ear like an earring, as if art were the ultimate accessory, while pairs of stylized bees and upside-down dancers cavort below.

Among several large, lyrically abstracted paintings, Johnny Bicos's canvas reveals the faintest outlines of human forms beneath scraped-down brown-reds. The stylized features of a face emerge mysteriously from the broad forms and faintly tinted layers of Volker Hüller's collaged canvas. Also noteworthy is Alexander Tovborg's painting — at nearly seven feet wide the largest work in the show — depicting a flotilla of snails on a colorful geometric pattern.

Absorbing such artworks, one realizes that the coherence of the installation can be partly credited to the intense conversation between them — to their shared enthusiasm for quirky subjects, evocative materials and techniques, and askance views on cultural norms. Less uniformly evident is an appreciation of the kind of pictorial tensions one might find in a Matisse, Mondrian, or Rothko: the way a particular weight of blue, pressed to a corner, leverages an opposing red. It's an experience of color energies that lies nascent on an artist's palette and reaches its full, poignant expression in the great works in museums, but can't be fully discerned on a computer monitor or tablet.

This pictorial energy does appear at points in *Let's Get Figurative*. One senses it in the painting by Annie Pearlman, who, despite her work as a video artist, still appears to be moved by the peculiar pressures of colors in a piece like "Dog Flow" (2014); there's something poignant about the ebullient red — given to a form resembling a twisted balloon animal — that perches, vulnerably, upon retiring dark greens and blue-grays. Clayton Schiff's untitled painting from 2015 features a disheveled dog (or is it a sheep?) sauntering lazily through a barren yellow landscape of fantastical plants. It's cartoonish in its rendering of forms and hallucinatory shifts of scale — and yet, these dislocations attain a weird gravity as colors press and pull viscerally through space.

Most impressive of all is "Nativity" (2005), a painting of angular, elongated figures by Mernet Larsen, who happens to be far and away the oldest artist in the show (b. 1940). Here, two blue figures suspended in a sky resemble bent planks with zig-zagging gold wings. On the ground, another figure, as obtuse as a Lego chair, leans away from a cubistic baby in a manger. Though highly contrived in style, the scene rings true. Colors, recording the weight of light, persuasively locate every form, so that the angels' forms hover palpably above our point of view, just as the Virgin's nose projects fin-like from her face. Distant shades of Raphael: we're convinced, not of the artist's piety but of a curious rapture of forms. The image is nothing if not quirky, but here the quiriness grows out of greater purposes rather than a strategy of effect.