

The Figure as Fiction:

*The Figure in
Visual Art and
Literature*

Curated by Elaine A. King, Ph.D.

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Artists in the Exhibition

Matthew Antezzo

Ida Applebroog

Martin Beck

Ashley Bickerton

Jay Bolotin

Darrell Brothers

Lesley Dill

Barbara Ess

Robert Flack

Sylvie Fleury

Rimma Gerlovina

and Valeriy Gerlovin

Elliot Green

Jane Hammond

Lauren Lesko

Paul McCarthy

Frank Moore

Daniel Oates

Tony Oursler

Ann Preston

Alan Rath

Michael Rees

Elaine Reichek

James Rosenquist

Amy Sillman

Megan Williams

David Wojnarowicz

Kevin Wolff

Pamela Wye

Lisa Yuskavage

An Infinite Menu of Choice

The Figure As Fiction

We are living in a complex transitional time. As a society we are bombarded by a morass of information, major technological advances, shifting international politics and economics, diminishing resources and life-threatening over-population. In some ways, parallels can be drawn between our time and the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century; both eras are marked by rapid, overwhelming technological and economic changes, with all phases of life being affected and altered. In this Post-Industrial Age, the impact of the down-sizing of labor and the acceleration of the superhighway of information allow for myriad responses, both positive and negative, across global borders from Paris, New York, and Seoul, to Moscow, Madrid and Mexico City.

The Industrial Revolution brought human beings face to face with machines, a relationship that has accelerated and intensified throughout the twentieth century. Today, technology permeates all areas of our environment. It no longer functions as a mere tool for advancement; it has become an integral part of every aspect of contemporary life. Just as photography and film influenced all facets of the early Modernist movement at the onset of the twentieth century, the computer, with its apparently unrestricted potential, is reshaping our lives and attitudes at the close of this Post-Modern era.¹

The exhibition, *The Figure as Fiction* explores how artists at the end of this century are depicting the figure. It presents a sampling of artworks in various media by a group of artists varying both in age and background. What they share is the necessity of coping with the flood of information that now overwhelms all of us. How they integrate personal issues, observe reality and respond to external stimuli and cultural multiplicity is manifested in the art assembled here. This work is clever and unconventional, and it requires careful reading.

Until the twentieth century, visual artists traditionally focused on the external, physical reality of the human figure, leaving it to literary artists to deal with the invisible aspects of human character and experience. The writers' words took their readers on voyages through emotional and geographical space, but it always remained for the readers to endow the fictional characters with a physical presence in their own mind's eye. In the visual arts, as in literature, there was always more than was immediately visible. For although one may think that one perceives visual works of art in an "all at once way," such works are often rich in symbolism, filled with implied messages and meanings that take time to decipher. Like literary works, such art releases its story over time.

The society created by the Industrial Revolution was one in which a growing middle class had both the means and the time to pursue leisure activities. Greater opportunities for education expanded the audience for literature and art. Books and prints became familiar items in many households throughout the United States and Europe. Reading novels became a popular form of entertainment and a status symbol. In both the visual arts and fiction, the figure was portrayed in a realistic manner through a formal, narrative structure. Since the close of the nineteenth century, however, and the rapid evolution of an avant-garde style of visual art embracing abstraction as its formal and dominant language, the figure in the visual arts has only recently returned to prominence. Just as James Joyce's *Ulyssess*, published in 1921, radically challenged the accepted order of fiction, so Marcel Duchamp ruptured aesthetic tradition by championing concept over retinal value. This master of the "Readymade" is credited with critically altering the direction of art in this century. In his work, the act of choice became imperative—objects unto themselves became useless outside the Idea. Like Duchamp, Joyce, too, can be viewed as a kindred-spirit to many contemporary artists who elect to mix metaphors and fragments, and act out of a posture of choice. As the book once entertained and influenced a society in the previous century, the depersonalized figure of the television and video screen has contributed to the comeback of the figure in art.

Although non-objective art tended to dominate mainstream discourse throughout this century until 1978, (when art such as that included in Marcia Tucker's "*Bad*" *Painting*² exhibition became known), figuration remained viable as a genre for both painters and sculptors, but in a less obvious and celebrated manner. Appearing sporadically through the stylistic art movements of Surrealism, American Regionalism (Thomas Hart Benton-Brand and WPA) in the thirties, Pop, and Photo-Realism, in the sixties and seventies, it is only in the past decade that figurative art has once again gained a solid footing, divorced from a dependency on trendy styles or rigid theoretical validation.

Through the ideals of early Modernism, the avant-garde relieved artists of the traditional representational response to their world. In each subsequent decade much art made during the past century was divested of extraneous subject matter through the process of subtraction. Formal and material presentations were paramount—ethnic and cultural codes, as well as specific subject matter were progressively eliminated in the quest for a universal language. After the devastation of World War II, non-objective artists like Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman turned to reductivism in their pursuit of personal spiritual paths. In the sixties, the ultimate quest of Minimalist artists, such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris, to produce the perfect form and object led to an art that was cut off from the world and humanity.

Despite the explorations of Post-Minimalist and Conceptual artists, figurative art survived through the formal transformations of many late Modernists, including Robert Arneson, Chuck Close, Jim Dine, George Segal, and Robert Colescott. With the rise of Neo-Expressionism and "Bad" Painting in the early 1980s, and with the work by a new generation of artists rallying around the work of Philip Guston, figurative art discovered a new vitality. What separates this younger generation of figurative artists from those practicing prior to the eighties is their more conceptual and fragmented approach to the human form and its context, as opposed to earlier figurative representation which remained descriptively narrative and tied to the grid and art history. Although Pop Art and Super Realism rekindled an interest in subject matter

throughout the sixties and seventies, it was the achievements of many—Jonathan Borofsky, Anselm Kiefer, Cindy Sherman, Leon Golub, Laurie Anderson, Nancy Spero, Ed Paschke, and Eric Fischl—who not only employed the human figure as a critical visual motif but also freely enlisted into their art a full range of human conditions, experiences, and knowledge.

In contrast, the figure in literature, theatre, film and contemporary culture has remained viably essential for decades. In the visual arts, figuration took a back-seat position as a significant motif. Now surprisingly, at the end of the twentieth century, the figure has returned to art almost one-hundred years after its slow demise, which began with the onset of avant-garde art under the banner of Modernism. During the past few years, academic and mediocre “politically correct” art have been crucial factors in restoring an interest in figurative art among both artists and audiences. Furthermore, the expansion of critical theory to subjects focusing on gender studies, multiculturalism, revisionist history, and ethnic identification has strengthened the relevance of the figure as subject. At the same time, the technological, imaginative world of *MTV* cannot be dismissed as insignificant; there is a strong, yet somewhat surprising media influence on the emerging artists of the “X” generation referred to as “Thirteeners.”³, a title assigned to the thirteenth generation of Americans born after the signing of the Constitution in 1776.

The term “figuration” is ambiguous. It refers not only to human or animal figures rendered in some recognizable degree, but also to the implication of figures in abstract works. Figuration manifested in American art since the eighties has taken on a new character. Instant communication and media access impact all aspects of daily life. An entire generation has grown up on television, computers and video. Today new technologies are as commonplace as the telephone or electricity. For the first time in history, millions of people are able to see the same images and hear or read the same information almost simultaneously. An infinite menu of choice is now available to everyone—spectacle is commonplace and we seem to demand even more stimulation. Time becomes a critical factor on what is seen and how it affects the viewers and their ability to comprehend information.

A sense of fragmentation and transformation characterizes late Post-Modern figuration. The figure in the nineties expresses the conditions of a fragmented social structure, conveying an air of suspicion, of fractured relationships and disfranchisement. The portrayal of the figure has increasingly become divorced from representation. Themes of denial, loss, cynicism, and identification have replaced the linear narratives of an earlier society that lived in a unified world of prescribed culture—gone is “The Age of Innocence.” The figure today no longer functions as a conveyor of factual essences, but as a symbol or surrogate for other meanings. An undefinable yet tragic tone prevails in much of contemporary art. For some artists, figural references act merely as an extension of a performance, a mirror of culture, a window into another world, or as the proof for a critical theory. However, the intention of the artist is no longer so obvious because the presented figure is often veiled and enigmatic, and is no longer locked into a single category.

Because of the open-ended structure of this exhibition, a viewer may come away feeling frustrated. This curator shares the expansive interpretations of the figure rendered by artists in all media. *The Figure As Fiction* intentionally provides an assemblage—it gives no single definition of the figure. The art presented in this exhibition neither constitutes a specific movement nor posits a particular ideological point of view. If anything, this work shares a healthy diversity, from a quest for personal identity to a social critique of late Post-Modern society. Today, the figure in visual art is more closely linked to the figure evoked in literature as a figment of our imagination. Because of society’s exposure to multi-media, viewers today are capable of perceiving much information in a work of art without having traditional representation in front of them. The visual artist, in a manner akin to the writer of fiction, now appears to produce the figure in an abstract way, more closely aligned to the way in which language builds a text. However, unlike the writer who continues to be confined to the word in order to release concepts and narratives, contemporary artists now mix media and employ everything from painting and photography, to computer-generated art and video. Many of the works included here are inter-disciplinary and cross-referential.

This exhibition is designed to allow each work to speak for itself. The idiosyncratic contents housed in the gallery could be equated with a library containing shelves of books spanning a gamut of genres—romance, horror, mystery, science fiction, westerns. In examining these works, viewers are asked to proceed with an open-mind and to allow the visual ideas to evoke narrative sensations prompted by their imagination. The artist does not intend to illustrate a single preconceived idea; but, instead, uses language to release an internal meaning rather than an external function or observation. An interesting relationship can be discerned between contemporary art and nineteenth-century romantic and symbolist literature and painting. Through the use of symbol, metaphor and allegory, forms that represent one reality lend themselves to the expression of psychological, mythical and spiritual aspects of the human condition. As with fictional literature, a freedom for interpretation abounds. Just imagine two individuals sitting at a library table reading Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* or Sontag's *Volcano Lover*. Would the hero or heroine look the same in each reader's mind? Would the same conclusion be derived about the author's intention or the hero or heroine's persona? It is doubtful! The same applies to the examination of Ashley Bickerton's recent totem self-portraits, which represent a composite of autobiographical symbols and elements.

Pop Art, and its "Five-Star General" Andy Warhol, burst the bubble on Modernist idealism. Since the early sixties, a marked shift can be observed in the sensibilities of Post-Modern art, which is marked by cynicism. Multiple readings and hidden agendas became common factors in this art, which deliberately set out to confuse and even irritate the viewer. Today, some artists attempt to skew dominant trends, and avoid making works based primarily on current mainstream theoretical discourse. As in the seventies, an atmosphere of pluralism pervades—artists have once again begun to engage in art-making in a declassified manner.

In examining this art, it is imperative to keep in mind that several generations of artists are represented. Many of the artists assert their artistic independence from the accepted culture but affirm a concern for ethical responsi-

bility and shared values. James Rosenquist, whose career took flight in the sixties under the banner of Pop, explores powerful social issues in his recent paintings taken from photographs of mysterious, generic dolls. A strange sensation pervades these images that are at once ugly and beautiful, attractive and repulsive. Alan Rath is a young artist who uses his training as an engineer to construct sophisticated techno-sculptures in his investigation of the impact and implications of high technology on human life. Martin Beck's paintings, resembling pages from a story book, portray male rituals and bonding. But, what may seem ordinary or traditional, resonates as bizarre upon a closer look. Elliott Green is a member of the "Thirteeners,"⁴ the generation of artists who grew up governed by media. His phantasmagorical compositions depict a curious blending of Disney cartoons with high art. This work demonstrates how values and attitudes invested in popular culture are vital subjects in contemporary art. Matthew Antezzo recycles photographic images used to illustrate critical reviews in New York art magazines from two decades prior—Barry Le Va appears to be engaged in the performance *Velocity*, 1970, "But what you see, is not what you think you see."⁵ Applying a deconstruction approach to history, these conceptual paintings are not intended to read as simple records nor to celebrate Le Va—they are visual puzzles.

In the enigmatic images of Amy Sillman and Jane Hammond, nostalgia and memory come into play; the viewers are requested to examine the translucent layers containing collaged symbols and mythic characters. For them, visual clues function as a language in which visual signs may work to suggest nonvisual messages. Michael Rees reflects upon scientific advancements in the arena of genetics and human cloning. His bizarre sculptures of quasi-species, reveal his thoughts about test-tube creation and its potential consequences for future organic forms. Is this artist perhaps asking: "Has life become the latest artifact in global cultural advancement?" "Has the scientist become the great-sculptor-designer?"

The fictional drama in art by contemporary women often focuses on abuse, incest, and social scripting played out. Unlike feminists of the seventies, who

sometimes blatantly asserted their disapproval of and anger toward male society through raw and sexual forms, some contemporary feminists opt instead to employ strategy, symbolism and critical theory in a more subtle manner. In the constructed paintings of Ida Applebroog, themes of isolation, violence and indifference are evident. Provocative theatricality emanates from her portrayal of human relationships and their fractured existence. Lauren Lesko's art is an exploration of female identity and a critique of the politics of sexual difference. Through her sleek conceptual approach, she emphasizes inherent aspects of female subjectivity. With a humorous bite, she addresses taboo zones in the life of a woman. Pamela Wye's computer-generated drawing/installation deconstructs the myth of Heidi and examines the expected female role of giver and nurturer. Her seemingly reader-friendly cartoon sketches pack a powerful punch!

A sense of hide-and-seek is evoked in the color saturated paintings by Lisa Yuskavage. An Edgar Allan Poe type of melodrama is conveyed by her images of solitary female figures; her women appear as mirages, standing seductively confident yet vulnerable. In the art of Megan Williams, old dictionaries are transformed into magical, three-dimensional, miniature landscapes through her careful carving. Williams uses the familiar book form as a point of departure in order to alter our notion of language and its hidden messages. Painting, photography and knitting—high art and craft—meet and meld in Elaine Reichek's explorations of gender and identity. In her *Tierra de Fuego* series, she demonstrates that the interpretation of a culture is dependent upon "who wrote it." A sense of heightened mystery characterizes the pin-hole camera imagery of Barbara Ess. With the absence of a depth-of-field, nothing separates shape and space; image and illusion are indivisible in her dark and haunting photographs.

Contemporary artists recognize that in the role of protagonist, they must address the concerns of the audience in an accessible vocabulary that relates their specific art to a viewer with shared experiences and cultures. In the highly formal collaborative works of Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin, linguistics, mythology, painting, performance, sculpture and photography are

ter that hints at an invisible world outside the realm of Western culture. His visionary imagery celebrates the male body in an attempt to integrate the physical with the transformational tools of the mind.

The violence perpetrated within ordinary middle class families is the theme in the video performance by Paul McCarthy, who examines autocratic parents and child abuse through black-humor, hand-puppetry, and animation.

For each of these artists, the definition of art, the figure, the role of the artist, and even the meaning of the viewer's gaze, varies greatly. This dynamic combination of artworks by established and emerging artists was chosen deliberately in order to cast a wide net. In some instances, the artist intends the figure to represent an aesthetic end in itself. In other examples, the figure might function as metaphor, intended to convey complex psychological, emotional, and critical investigations, either about the artist personally or about the larger society in which he/she lives and works. We hope that the viewer will see not only wherein the "figure is fiction" but also where it is fact. Novels were not written in a vacuum...have we not all encountered a Scarlett, even though the "Old South," and Tara are long gone?

Elaine A. King, Ph.D.

Executive Director and Chief Curator