

REPORT FROM WASHINGTON, DC

The Figure Returns

The most recent Corcoran Biennial surveyed American figurative painting, presenting a mix of formal experiment, sociopolitical commentary and psychological exploration.

BY ROBERT G. EDELMAN

The 43rd Biennial Exhibition of American Painting at the Corcoran Gallery of Art brought the figure back to center stage. Organized by curator Terrie Sultan, the show presented 90 paintings produced over the last two years by 25 artists from seven states. The works displayed a broad range of painting styles using the figure as a battered but still viable symbol of a society and a world in flux. Whether employing portraiture, caricature, narrative, art-historical appropriation or fragmented body imagery, the artists share the conviction that figuration remains a potent means of communication and social criticism. Highlighting this variety of approaches, the Biennial made a strong case for the importance, if not necessarily the preeminence, of the figure in contemporary American painting.

Sultan's premise for the exhibition was twofold. She identified the show's themes as "the psychology of representation, often through metaphorical or theatrical depictions of self, and social commentary that is conveyed through pictorial tableaux or image and text juxtapositions." This could also have been a partial description of the recent, much decried Whitney Biennial, except that the Corcoran show was also about issues specific to painting. Considering that most of the attention paid lately to the politics of the body has been focused on sculpture, the Corcoran Biennial indicated that a fruitful dialogue around the same issue exists among American figurative painters of different genders, generations and cultural and regional backgrounds.

As with much art these days, text plays a significant and integral role in the paintings of Ken Apter, Dotty Attie and Deborah Oropallo, and a subsidiary but spicy part in works by Leon Golub, Manuel Ocampo, Hung Liu and Kerry James Marshall. Collage and photographically derived images figure to varying degrees in pieces by Phyllis Bramson, Nancy Spero, David Humphrey, Donald Baechler, Michael Byron, Inga Frick and Luis Cruz Azaceta. Some artists rummage through traditional painting techniques or toy with art-historical sources, such as Robert Colescott, Catherine Howe, Charles Garabedian, Carole Caroompas, Melissa Miller, Jim Lutes, Kim Dingle, Elena Sisto and several others. Formal experimentation fuels the work of Ida Applebroog and the team of Drew Beattie and Daniel Davidson.

Not surprisingly, themes cross generational and other categorical lines. Takes on sexual politics were everywhere in evidence (Spero, Attie, Applebroog, Caroompas, Sisto), as were depictions of violence enacted or implied (Golub, Ocampo, Marshall, Oropallo) and investigations of the cracks in the social order (Colescott, Humphrey, Garabedian, Azaceta, Dingle). Many works use the past to com-



Kim Dingle: *Black Girl Dragging White Girl*, 1992, oil and charcoal on linen, 72 by 60 inches. Corcoran Gallery.

ment on the ambiguities of the present. The serious nature of these themes, however, is often tempered by considerable wit and humor.

The exhibition commenced with a room of recent pieces by Golub and Spero. Both artists presented bracing works, unlabored in appearance, well executed and directly to the point—exactly what one might expect from seasoned veterans. Golub was represented by (for him) modest-sized paintings that at first look like loose sketches intended as studies for larger, more finished works. However, the complexity of layered images and heavily worked surfaces quickly refutes this impression. Golub has introduced bits of crude graffiti and stenciled text onto his canvases, providing more equivocal images than his past declamatory compositions evoking torture and cruelty. His figures are street-smart characters who gesture in either a derogatory or playful fashion at the viewer, suggesting our complicity in the proceedings, whatever they might be. Who are these two leering guys in *Agent Orange* (1993), with their dark, threatening faces partially masked in shadow? Above them, a ghostly outline of a woman disrobing is placed in the line of fire of a pistol held in the hand of an unseen gunman; nearby, we read the stenciled query "Will Allegory Kill Art?" Art and life in a cauldron, via a master of figurative painting.

Spero's parade of female archetypes, gleaned from

collected images of goddesses, extroverts and cross-dressers from antiquity to the present, capers high across the gallery walls like a series of figures in a Greek frieze. Hand-printed and collaged on long scrolls of paper, her performers have impact and immediacy; their jubilant display is an appropriate foil for Golub's bellicose characters. Spero's collage technique, placing risqué examples of modern women thoroughly comfortable with their sexual identity side by side with mythological icons of fertility and power, stresses a historical continuity reiterated by the processional format. In *Sacred and Profane Love* (1993), a winged gorgon near a mute stone effigy waves solicitously. A Greco-Roman dancer who handles a phallus-shaped object like a microphone approaches a fantastic tuberos creature based on the Celtic goddess Sheela-na-gig. Linked together in rhythmic sequence, these pictographs from Spero's still-unfolding image-history of women are like musical notations for a triumphal march.

Applebroog, Colescott and Garabedian are all old hands at their brand of figuration, and their work, too, evinces maturity and a distinct vision. Applebroog's *Empty Orchestra* (1993) is an installation of multiple canvases, mounted on the wall or standing strategically on the floor, that add up to a roomful of macabre personalities. Drawn with austere clarity, Applebroog's masked or animal-headed men loom on the gallery wall as figures of questionable authority. In the smaller, darker canvases on the floor, naked women are displayed in vulnerable situations—in a bathtub or bent over at the waist—near a sign that reads "Jesus is Coming Soon." Using devices like cropping, sequencing and dramatic scale, Applebroog presents a theatrical event that has both comic and tragic dimensions.

Colescott manages to make even the most disconcerting subjects humorous. With a deliberately crude and garish painterly style, he proffers trenchant narratives that brandish an in-your-face perspective on cultural stereotypes and expectations. His *Between Two Worlds* (1992) depicts a woman of mixed parentage who faces the dilemma of choosing between two female forebears of differing races, each vying for her allegiance. Her woeful expression is distorted by an oval lens or mirror as she gazes at an almond-eyed white woman who entices her with a large heap of metal gears (the stuff of industry). A spurned black woman looks on, eyeing her white counterpart with suspicion, having herself offered a pile of corn (the wealth of the earth). Above this trio, Colescott has installed darkened heavens where, in a pastiche of Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus*, mischievous cherubs hold up a mirror before a black odalisque, showing her an idealized white reflection. Colescott's ironic blend of contemporary drama with icons of art history, fashioned in a rough, somewhat cartoony style, makes for bitter laughter.



Phyllis Bramson: *Apple Picker*, 1992, mixed mediums, 72 by 48 inches. Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago.

Where Colescott's players are animated and raucous, Garabedian's reposing figures from his series "Studies for the Iliad" appear cool and detached, languishing among classical ruins like fallen caryatids. Garabedian has in the past used reclining figures that often fill the width and breadth of his canvases. Here the translucent bodies lie separately, anonymously and obliviously on a flesh-colored desert, their bones and muscles rhythmically protruding. A headless torso, blood spurting from his neck, recalls some of the more grisly scenes of the Siennese primitives. Where Colescott is all swaggering brushwork, Garabedian relies on the layering of small strokes, almost as if he were using egg tempera. His unorthodox interpretation of the glorified violence of Homer's epic suggests that contemporary indifference and silence have their own barbarous aspects.

Bramson, Azaceta and Liu juxtapose disparate images to construct complex narratives, either autobiographical or metaphorical in nature, sometimes with political overtones. Bramson's paintings often require a certain patience due to the sheer busyness of their multiple or overlapping narratives. However, her recent collage works have a distinct appeal, despite (or due to) their gleeful embrace of kitsch elements, such as details from decorative bouquet paintings produced for mass consumption in the Philippines. In *Suddenly It's Winter* (1992), she collages these opulent buds like a wreath around her own delicately painted images of toppling crystal balls, an out-of-control puppet and a weeping girl, all stitched together with tiny crosshatched strokes. Bramson manages to combine these poignant vignettes alluding to the transience of beauty with gaudy floral sentiment and make it look convincing.

In his large, unstretched canvases, Azaceta merges figural and abstract elements so as to suggest both cultural and personal loss (the artist emigrated from his native Cuba as a teenager). In *Split Rafter* (1993), a slender, naked man, his body mysteriously severed at the waist, stands upright, ankle-deep in water, observing a small rowboat. His hands have turned into tools—a hammer and an oar. The craft's interior glows like fire, warming his face. A black disk above his head is pointed to the north star; it could guide

him through the linear grid resembling a large fishnet that seems to bar his departure. Azaceta has captured a moment of existential angst: the will to flight versus the impossibility of escape. His flatly executed brushwork and high-keyed color amplifies the pathos of the scene.

Hung Liu came of age during the Cultural Revolution in China; trained as a Socialist Realist painter, she produces works that are an amalgam of Eastern and Western influences. Since 1988 she has made paintings based on turn-of-the-century photographs of Chinese prostitutes, which often show them dressed in Western garb. In *Raft of the Medusa* (1992) Liu, like Azaceta, uses an image of a boat, perhaps also as a metaphor of cultural transition. Working from an old studio photograph, she shows the same young woman twice, dressed as a boy and as a girl, sitting passively in a boat on rough waters. Painted in a blue monochrome, the pair gaze at the viewer from a canvas shaped like a TV screen. The fabricated red lily attached to the canvas might symbolize a kind of freedom (sexual, personal or political), but the purpose of the journey remains an enigma.

Attie, Caroompas, Aptekar and Howe all take their motifs from the storehouse of art history and give them updated roles to perform. Attie takes painted flesh as her subject, particularly as it was treated by 19th-century masters such as Géricault, Eakins and Courbet. Isolating details of well-known masterpieces, she meticulously renders them in warm, varnished tones, then realigns them in grids, forcing a new reading of their content. In *After Courbet* (1993), six sections cropped from some of the more erotic moments in Courbet's oeuvre—limbs and faces of recumbent women—are placed subordinatedly beside the artist's early, wild-eyed self-portrait. Do we recognize the artist as the sum of his images, of his obsessions? Is Attie's choice of intimate details meant to challenge the viewer's indulgence in these slices of painterly and prurient pleasure? Considering the heated debate that was generated over his icono-

Catherine Howe: *Pink Arabesque*, 1992, oil on linen, 84 by 60 inches. Collection Claudio Paola Bardignan.



graphic intentions by the Brooklyn Museum's "Courbet Reconsidered" in 1988, perhaps Attie would allow for a provocative ambiguity.

Caroompas leaves little room for ambiguity; for her, the canvas is a battleground for age-old adversaries facing one another across the gender divide. Women appear to have the upper hand in *Before and After Frankenstein: The Woman Who Knew Too Much: Bedside Vigil* (1992), in which famous females from the annals of art history carry male heads as trophies, à la Judith and Holofernes. The green-tinged women, solid as bronze statues, are naked or in Greco-Roman or Renaissance attire (lifted from Mantegna and oth-



Robert Colescott: *Between Two Worlds*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 84 by 72 inches. Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery.

ers); they carry swords and display their grisaille male heads taken from present-day media sources. A woman in Elizabethan garb offers a broken-nosed boxer's head on a platter, like Salome with St. John. Her gesture is repeated in the background pattern by a nurse bearing a medicine tray. Caroompas applies paint in a graphic, precise manner, which suits the metaphor-laden space of her canvases. She tempers her polemical message with a black humor that can cut deeply, even when her compositions are overcrowded with information.

Aptekar surperimposes fragmented phrases over old-master paintings or passages from them, turning familiar art works into vehicles for ironic commentary. He mounts glass panels with etched text over his own informal transcriptions on wood of a Rembrandt self-portrait, for example, or a scene from a Raphael. In *Heavy Equipment* (1992), two generic Baroque figures (taken from separate Rembrandt portraits) wearing ornate vestments are cropped at the neck; the text consists of typical phrases from the *New York Times* Wedding section, such as "partner in the New York law firm of." Aptekar finds droll parallels between these symbols of success from different eras, while asserting that painting can function as a means of reconnecting past and present.

Howe also takes celebrated paintings as a point of departure, using Abstract-Expressionist works as backdrops for her portraits of self-assured women. In *The Web* (1992), her background treatment mim-

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ics the gestural brushwork of de Kooning, while the portrait conjures up the painterly bravura of John Singer Sargent. In *Mirage* (1993), Howe renders with short, emphatic strokes the features of a young black woman set against a hot orange, Clyfford Still-like wall of paint. Attempting to bridge the gap between "heroic" abstraction and her female subjects, Howe establishes a surprising rapprochement between Ab-Ex machismo and her pastiche of traditional portraiture.

A portraiture of body fragments, often employed as signs or symbols, characterizes the work of Baechler, Humphrey, Lutes and the team of Beattie and Davidson. Baechler's images of schematized hands and heads are outlined over collages of repeated stock pictures of geometric objects (woodblocks, beach balls) on paper or newsprint. In *Profile with Four Palms #1* (1992), he inserts four hands taken from a basic palm-reading text inside a generic head outlined in profile, alluding to the mysterious nature of individual fate and fortune. With an economy of means all too rare in this show, and in a drawing style that has moved away from childlike precocity, Baechler reduces the complex relationship between mind and body to its essential elements.

Humphrey employs computer-altered photocopies to enlarge and distort family photographs which are then painted onto canvas. Although his works have often been interpreted as commentaries on family dysfunction, Humphrey's combination of disparate pictures within individual paintings tends to disrupt any facile reading of their narrative thrust. In *Your Sponge* (1992), a roomful of people is seemingly being observed by a boy's head in a blue paint puddle that looms ominously above them and drips in their direction. In an adjacent orange spill, a smug cartoon pig prepares to jump into the scene. Through unsettling juxtapositions, Humphrey offers chilling clues to a family history. Is the young man a disturbing memory, an apparition of guilt or perhaps just a topic of conversation?

An even more bizarre derivation of portraiture issues from the mass of entangled brushstrokes of Lutes's *Too Lips* (1992). Through seemingly random gestures, Lutes manages to convey a chaotic order. Painting on top of a generic landscape, he applies snakelike strings of intense color until a fearsome head emerges with interspersed orifices that suggest eyes or tiny mouths. Lutes's methodically layered "automatic portraits" emerge from the underlying mundane vistas with the inevitability of a recurrent nightmare.

Beattie and Davidson collaborate on outsized portraits scraped into a pre-painted surface by means of voice- or radio-activated toy trucks and bulldozers that are induced to move across the still-



Leon Golub: *Jubilance*, 1993, acrylic on linen, approx. 6' by 10 feet. Courtesy Josh Baer Gallery.



Above, Hung Liu: *Raft of the Medusa*, 1992, oil on canvas with lacquered wood, mixed mediums, 61 by 96 by 8 1/2 inches. Collection Eric and Barbara Bobkin.

Below, Manuel Ocampo: *Duro es el Paso*, 1992, oil on linen, diptych: full dimensions 96 inches square. Private collection, Los Angeles, courtesy Fred Hoffman Fine Art, Los Angeles.





David Humphrey: *Your Sponge*, 1992, oil on canvas, 82 by 72 inches. Courtesy David McKee Gallery.

wet canvas. Repeated runs over an area produce shades, hollows and rough textures. As with Lutes, the disembodied heads that result from this strange process bear abstracted, exaggerated features. In *Call Me Fantastic* (1992), a frenetic mesh of lines describes a melon-shaped face with saucers for ears, suggesting a cross between a crazed mouse and a cartoon villain. At present these "Dozer" paintings seem to be at an experimental stage, despite their immediate impact.

Dingle and Marshall offered some of the most affecting works in the Biennial. Both artists are involved in an unadorned storytelling that plays off conventional representational modes. Dingle's wrestling and boxing girls seem to be preparing themselves for an uncertain future. Their party attire—white dresses and patent-leather shoes—suggests both a purity of spirit and an idealized, momentary equality between the antagonists. In *Black Girl Dragging White Girl* (1992), Dingle sets up a dynamic encounter in a neutral space fraught with ambiguity. Is this a gesture of assistance or aggression, a game or a struggle? Her sketchy use of charcoal and oil paint lends her figures a vitality and fluidity of motion. Dingle's theatrical arrangement of the girls' supple limbs and ambiguous facial expressions seems to convey a self-conscious search for identity.

Marshall's *The Lost Boys* (1993) is a poignant elegy to squandered and misguided youth. Two young black boys in a dreamlike playground, their eyes locked on the viewer, grasp symbolic instruments of power: one holds a plastic gun, the other the wheel of a mechanical race car. Their gazes are both childish and worldly. Dates are inscribed on the canvas in gold on or near the figures—probably the days of their deaths. A halo of white roses surrounds their heads, and a tree of life with glowing bulbs containing bullets stands nearby. *Lost Boys* is Marshall's memorial to innocent victims, reflecting the violence that so often claims the lives of our culture's children.

The Corcoran Biennial may not have broken new ground, but it did reinforce the notion that contemporary figurative painting can deal with topical, even controversial issues. It also illustrated how painters continue to do battle with a long tradition that

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media artists, for example, can all but ignore. In her catalogue essay, Sultan points out that the "conventions of allegory and myth that these artists employ can be seen as an extension of the schism between idealized and referential gestures that has dominated the vernacular of postwar American art." This may be true, but the same could also be said of the history of painting in general.

What seems more compelling here is that painters who choose to use the figure today can do so with great freedom and openness to information outside of painting's own conventions. Maybe it's time to show some of these painters with media artists like Matthew Barney and Gary Hill and see what happens. In any case, figurative painting is alive and well, and the Corcoran show has brought it some much-deserved attention. □

The 43rd Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting was held at the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C., Oct. 30, 1993-Jan. 2, 1994. A catalogue accompanied the exhibition.

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