

True Stories

Laylah Ali

Jules de Balincourt

Salomon Huerta

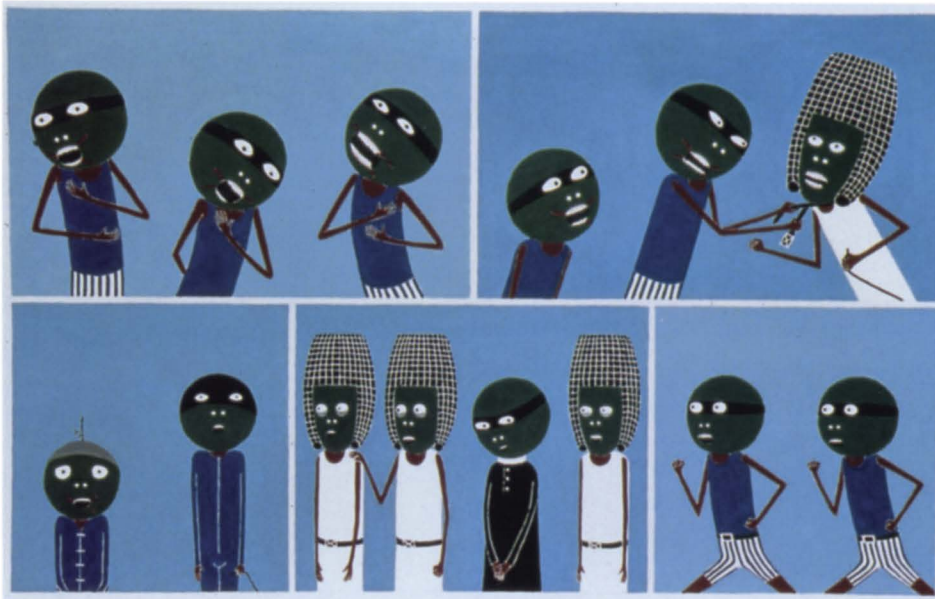
Christopher Leitch

Muntean/Rosenblum

Amy Sillman

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art



Laylah Ali, *Untitled (Greenheads)*, 1998, gouache on paper, 12" x 14^{3/4}", collection Bernicestine and Harold Bailey, CT

True Stories

The drawings and paintings featured in this exhibition highlight some of the options available to artists who are presently using the language of figuration. The works on display demonstrate that artists who are prepared to look beyond their chosen media and disciplines are revitalizing figurative drawing and painting. Although a number of the works shown here are informed by the look of video games, computer images, photography and film, all are ultimately handmade.

A wonderful aspect of art is that, after thousands

of years of figurative painting, idiosyncratic styles and images still abound. This exhibition does not aim for homogeneity. Instead, it suggests the current landscape of figurative drawing and painting. The exhibition includes male and female artists of differing ages as well as various ethnicities and nationalities. This exhibition offers a range of perspectives instead of a singular view. There is no dominant style in our increasingly globalized culture.

The artists included in *True Stories* have something to communicate to us that goes beyond a certain feeling



Christopher Leitch, *O Noble One, chance diaries, November 2001 - March 2002: dreaming about Mom, 2001-02*, (detail, 1 of 56 pieces), randomly selected media and paper, 18" x 24", courtesy of the artist, Kansas City, MO

or sensation. That is why they have chosen figuration over abstraction. This is not to say these artists are necessarily forthcoming, for the beauty of a work of art is precisely that its meaning is never direct or singular. Instead, a work of art inherently inspires renewed interpretation. These interpretations will vary in proportion to the viewer's personal interests and experiences. This essay will examine some of the facts and fictions that the works created by these seven artists bring to mind.

Salomon Huerta paints portraits that force us to rethink what constitutes portraiture. A portrait is an evocation of a likeness. In Huerta's portraits, however, the facial features that render an appearance most clearly identifiable are hidden from view. This artist depicts either the heads or the entire bodies of his models as he perceives them from the back. The figures, all pulled off the street, are depicted in singular isolation at the center of the composition in front of a brightly colored monochrome background. Thus, they become vulnerable while retaining their anonymity. At times, they seem interchangeable. By losing their identity, they become objectified – almost abstractions. Who are these people, and what are they thinking?

The fully clothed, standing figures fill almost the entire height and more than two-thirds of the width of the large vertical canvases. In contrast, the paintings of heads and necks perceived in greater close-up occupy almost perfectly square compositions. Each painting is symmetrical. Because each model is either clean-shaven or sporting a crew cut, the "head-shots" do not always enable us to determine whether we are looking at a man or a woman. Race, however, remains distinguishable. As an artist born in Tijuana and living in Los Angeles, Huerta cannot forget the issue of race. The artist's singular focus upon models with very little or no hair also raises questions regarding fetishism and sexual preference. Huerta aims for smooth, elementary, Brancusian forms and the slick, immaculate surfaces for which L.A. painting is renowned.

Muntean/Rosenblum, the London and Vienna-based artist duo, draw and paint images of young men and women. Ours is a youth-oriented culture, and these artists examine what it means today to be young and somewhat innocent. The message they convey is disconcerting. These youths are aimless creatures with seemingly few interests and ambitions. They look hopelessly bored and assume the poses, gestures and mannerisms of their counterparts

featured in advertisements. In large, powerful acrylic-on-canvas compositions reminiscent of the great paintings of old, it becomes obvious that these artists' characters enact nothing whatsoever. The models' perceived or actual insignificance is underscored by the format of the images – a rectangle with rounded corners framed by white borders – reminiscent of old photographs or of televised fodder. It is also conveyed by inscriptions appearing in block letters underneath the images, proclaiming nonsense of the order of: "Mystery is the promise of unknown things which you must be wise enough to explore not too deeply, for fear you will dead-end in nothing but facts," with entirely convincing occasional lapses in spelling, grammar and punctuation.

The more intimate pencil drawings of single individuals seen in close-up likewise combine text and image. These works are more sexually charged. Here, we confront the actors – who assume provocative poses as we see them from somewhat risqué vantage points – one on one. The youths respond to us with word and glance: "It is such a privilege to know how being selfless feels." The paintings and drawings are executed in a straightforward, matter-of-fact style that is perfectly suited to their subject.

The French, Brooklyn-based artist Jules de Balincourt is extremely fond of narrative. His paintings, executed with oil, spray paint and pen on board, appear as climactic moments that are excised from a larger narrative context that is unknown to the viewer. Whether de Balincourt imagines his own stories or bases his episodes upon ready-made sources is unclear. This could perhaps be ascertained, but that would take away from the mystery of his paintings. For example, in the dark movie theater represented in one picture, where the viewers all turn light and dark blue in the glow of the movie screen, do we really want to know what is going to happen next? All hell could break loose – though maybe not. There is obvious tension as we look down upon dozens of figures, sitting in a precipitously receding space, who stare back at us.

There is something almost frightening about the empty supermarket with the lone cashier in another picture. This interior is seen from a three-quarter angle from above, with its check-out counters and shelves arranged according to the unyielding laws of one point perspective. In *Leisure Land* and *Free for All*, great drama is not merely hinted at. In the former,



Muntetan/Rosenblum, *Untitled (There is no transcendental point from which we may observe the past; it is always constructed in the present and changed along with its movements.)*, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 79" x 98", courtesy Daniel Hug Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

a car winds its way around a cliff as a dam breaks in the valley below and water rushes forward, flooding a small town. In the latter, a helicopter hovers over the side of a mountain, casting its spotlight upon a compound as figures clad from head to toe in red

suits grab farm animals. What is going on here? De Balincourt paints in a naïf style, using highly saturated colors, flat textures, stiff lines, no modeling, and reveling in spatial recession as if he had just stumbled upon it. All of these elements give his



Jules de Balincourt, *Temporary Drop Out*, 2003, oil, spray paint and pen on board, 40" x 48", courtesy LFL Gallery, NY, collection Johnson County Community College

unorthodox paintings their particular urgency, flavor and youthful exuberance.

Laylah Ali's finely wrought gouaches on paper are inspired by the world of children's books, comic strips and animation, as well as graphic design. She has described her figures, with their large, spherical heads perched on top of thin bodies with extremely attenuated arms, as the letters in a personal alphabet – obviously subject to permutation. These highly stylized figures enact scenes of aggression and subjugation. Their skin is dark brown, and they have dark green heads. Issues of race, power, vulnerability

a uniform light blue ground. However, it is unclear whether these scenes are part of a single, incomplete storyline. Ali's art, so fraught with ambiguity, explores what happens when civilization dissolves into chaos.

Christopher Leitch, a Kansas City-based artist with an abiding interest in Cage and Zen, is fascinated by the notion of chance. He has been keeping journals since 1978, in which he records his dreams, and he has been working on his "chance diaries" since 1996. The latter are drawings produced by means of chance operations. Leitch will pick up the sheet lying at the top of a pile of found papers kept

emotion, they mix text with image as if in an ode or lament. These works have the freshness, clumsiness and spontaneity of a child's drawing – an effect that is not easily obtained. This child longs for his mother.

Amy Sillman's *30 Drawings*, executed with acrylic and gouache on paper, consists of 30 rectangular sheets of identical size and format arranged one next to the other in five registers, to create a single, rectangular, multipaneled composition. Large, usually monochrome washes break each sheet down into smaller compartments containing images teetering between figuration and abstraction. The cells, arranged as a grid upon the wall with large blank areas of exposed paper giving a rhythmic beat to the whole, bring the structure of comic books, and thus narrative, to mind. What the potentially implied story is about may be subject to discussion. The world of Krazy Kat somehow leads up to this.

In one panel, we see four heads lying side by side, as if in a medieval sick ward. In another, two heads grab one head each with their left hand, as four diminutive heads located deeper in space look on. In a third cell, a huge head perched on top of a stick-body, peers into a hole in the ground. Sillman places her delicate, deliciously goofy line drawings on top of diaphanous, wobbly fields reminiscent of Rothko.

Mistletoe, an oil on canvas, brings late Chagall to mind, with its wonderful light blue wash serving as a foil for clusters of red berries and foliage – the mistletoe in question – as well as see-through creatures, outlined in blue and then partly wiped out. Sillman has virtuosity akin to Condo's, in addition to that painter's ambition to mix supposedly high citations from the lexicon of modern art, with low references from the world of popular culture. In this painting, we see a figure from the rear with two pairs of buttocks and another with two pairs of heads. Sillman's pictures are filled with poetic mysteries.

True Stories suggests the images generated by artists relying upon private narratives may serve as vessels for the projection of each individual viewer's personal concerns.

Michaël Amy, critic and art historian, New York City and Rochester, NY



Amy Sillman, *Mistletoe*, 2001, oil on canvas, 48" x 62", courtesy Brent Sikkema Gallery, New York

and hatred are of obvious importance to Ali. As a woman and as a Boston-based African-American artist, she is aware of their ramifications. In *B Painting (Greenheads)*, one figure hollers at another one who has fallen to the ground from fear or exhaustion as a third figure cries out in despair or pleads for mercy. All three actors, dressed in sports gear, wear masks around their eyes. Their mouths are agape and their white teeth and pink gums are fully exposed.

In a multipaneled painting with half-length actors, three figures appear to be suffocating in the top left, a man is strapped to an electric chair beneath them, and three women and a priest wait in the central panel while a woman is being strangled and two men jog in neighboring panels. All five panels share

in his studio and draw upon it with the medium and color dictated by inscriptions on pieces of paper that are randomly drawn from a bowl. A spin of the wheel will determine whether he draws with his left or right hand.

The images he has created since his mother passed away are based upon his ongoing reading of his journals. When he comes across a mention of his mother, the artist draws an image based upon the dream in question. Leitch's aim is to remove himself from his work in order to make art that is arrived at almost independent of his will and, consequently, is largely uninflected by his personal taste. The drawings, with their uneven sizes and formats, are affixed directly to the wall in clusters along vertical and horizontal axis. Raw and charged with

Cover: Salomon Huerta, *Untitled Head*, 2003, oil on canvas on panel, 12" x 11³/₄", collection Mark Andrus, San Juan Capistrano, CA

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