

University of Pécs

Doctoral School

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UTOPIAN BODIES

Propositions for Contemporary Figurative Painting

DLA Dissertation Theses

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The studio practices of certain artists of the New Figuration scene focus on visual transformations that subtly rewrite the human figure, even rendering it illegible in extreme cases. These morphological experiments confuse and enrich the perspectives of the image as it has unfolded throughout the history of art and open up new possibilities for (self-) interpretation by mobilising different fictions and morphologies. My research responds to a theoretical discourse drawn from popular culture concerning the playful re-imagining of the body through art. I am interested in the variations of our (self-)image freely formed in the “playground” of painting. The moment when the human figure takes on the characteristics of abstraction and transforms into painting.

The representation of the human is formed in a context of specific utopias and dystopias, anxieties and hopes for the present and the future. Does the metamorphosis of the body, echoing the subversive moments of modernist invention, eradicate the tradition primarily linked to the sacred paradigm of the beautiful body in Western European Christian culture? I would like to outline the history and main characteristics of this contemporary trend, referred to in international literature as New Figuration, and the dilemmas that the critical response has formulated. I will focus on artists who draw from Léger, Picasso, Matisse and Beckmann and the various neo-expressionist new waves. Most of their references, however, are to be found on the seabed of the unconscious of popular culture that has been unfolding since the early 2000s: the post-Y2K¹ present, the contemporary cultural field that has become stuck in replay. My paper analyses the interlocking texture of possible art-historical and pop-cultural sources. The aim is to examine possible points of reference from Cranach to Cartoon Network and to analyse the wider context of morphological assumptions about the representation of figures. From the distortive procedures of Mannerism, through the analysis of the figurative bravura of the modern masters, to the particular ‘formlessness’ of the body called into play in cartoons, I will seek the contexts that shed light on the subversive possibilities of the contemporary figurative painter.

In discussing the notion of Zombie Figuration, I will present the main positions of the international critical reception of New Figuration and the particular unstable political forces that influence the reading of individual creative positions in the light of contemporary public discourses surrounding the idea of identity. The need to channel this multifaceted dialogue is particularly important because art history in the 20th and 21st centuries paid relatively little

¹ Y2K is an abbreviation for the “Year 2000 Problem”. It is also called the “Millennium bug”. A term often used to problematise hopes and fears for the year 2000.

attention to the theoretical exploration of figurative painting, as art critic Donald Kuspit has pointed out.² Or, as Niklas Maak put it, figurative painting has become “a completely isolated artistic biosphere, unaffected by the debates in art criticism and art history about painting as a medium”.³

I also examine the role of physical, bodily humour in the narrative of these painters' work. What replaces the heroic pathos that served the dramaturgy of figurative painting for centuries? How does the philosopher Henri Bergson's reflection on the very different characters of drama and comedy illuminate this turn of events, which is almost perceptible at first glance? Here, physical humour is incorporated as an overarching aesthetic factor, sinking into the deepest layers of the works.

In the chapter where the categories of the “cute” and “horror” are juxtaposed against each other, my aim was to make new layers of meaning available by incorporating perspectives isolated from the pop-cultural field. In my dissertation, I explore the phenomena of the “cute” and “horror” as the end values of a metaphorical potmetre.⁴ I hypothesise that the two extremes can be posited as constellations of dehumanisation, which can also be used to articulate the power relations associated with the figure. I have selected different perspectives to shed light on certain tendencies in contemporary figurative painting.

I would like to provide students of art with a guide to the viewpoints from which to approach the complex issue of distorting and rewriting the figure, which can also contribute to enriching their respective studio practice. It is thought-provoking to consider what it means in painting to subvert the canonised conception of form. Is it possible to destroy canons without creating new orders of form? What academy can be built on the ruins of the various forlorn traditions of figuration? Is there the possibility of immediacy, or is the figure always obscured by the involuntary associations of art history and pop culture? Although it is beyond my possibilities and abilities to give a full answer to the following questions, I believe that the first thing to do is always to dust off phenomena that have become clichés, exhausted topics, and futureless genres — the relevance of the representation of the human figure is eternal.

The following thesis-style assertions are either explicit in the argumentation of my thesis or follow indirectly from the internal logic of the context of the chapters.

² KUSPIT, Donald, The New Figurative & History Painting, *The Brooklyn Rail* (2017/06)

<https://brooklynrail.org/2017/06/editorsmessage/The-New-Figurative-History-Painting> (last accessed: 01/07/2023)

³ GOGARTY, Larne Abse, Figuring Figuration, *Art Monthly*, No. 465 (2023/06), 6

⁴ I first raised this frame metaphor in connection with the works of Mátyás Erényi.

Zita SÁRVÁRI - Gábor RIEDER (eds.), *YOUHU: The New Generation of Contemporary Art* (Budapest: Kieselbach Gallery, 2022), 350.

- I. The latest approach to figurative painting does not depart sharply from the Western art historical canon. Regardless of the platform through which one can best inform oneself about these trends, neither the basic iconographic elements, frame stories, raw materials, nor the representational conventions called into play are fundamentally overwritten. The fluid continuity of painting is not disrupted by the thresholds between the virtual and the real.
- II. Social media platforms, exploited along different artistic objectives, offer us a specific optic where, by following search tags, “anonymous” or emerging artists, as well as key institutions, we can get a broader picture of the unfolding of a trend “live”, intertwined with the practices of each art space. The quality of the phenomena and contexts we are able to detect depends on the efficiency with which we structure the information that comes to us. This is no different in the press.
- III. The contemporary painter finds himself in a force field of competing canons, which is why his objectives take a rather amorphous form. He is no longer necessarily animated by the myth of innovation, but he can even refer to artists who still had such a sense of the subversion of form-following representation. The vector of modernism in the case of contemporary artists is fluid, as evidenced by the cumulative prefixes (meta-, para-, post-, post-post-, crypto-, retro-, etc.) This is problematic only in terms of taxonomic classification, however, as the painter is, in fact, navigating between different theories beyond the horizon of definable expectations outside the city walls of theory.
- IV. In the somewhat one-planar palette of contemporary art’s “social practices,” which have been spun out under the burden of post-Duchampian logic, painting, as a victim of theoretical “PR”, appears in self-contradictory packages: at once subversive and retrograde, innovative and conservative, market-friendly and elitist, aristocratic and primitive, brave and scholastic, worthy of analysis and utterly empty. Yet painting does not need to be defended as one of the most sophisticated technologies in human culture for the complex, interpersonal coordination of thought, feeling, sensation, memory, perception and expression. Even the most radical ideas of contemporary painting share this heritage.

- V. Although I consider some of the contemporary artists mentioned in the thesis to be brilliant (Ákos Ezer, Kristina Schuldt, Grace Weaver), my overall aim was not to propagate artistic practices that I consider valuable. After all, the dissertation is not a pamphlet, the doctoral student is not a revolutionary, and far be it from me to advocate the self-serving antagonism and tribal division of contemporary art. In my thesis, I was concerned with the possibility of a complex approach that can go beyond the first gut judgments and offer the reader a series of interpretive pathways that plasticise the complexity of these works' internal referentiality, aesthetic self-contradictions and sensory realities.
- VI. The focus of my dissertation reveals a generational break, which is also very significant in terms of taste and references. I know this dissertation may also fall victim to the iron teeth of time, as it operates with partly 'perishable' materials. Nevertheless, I think that it would be a pity not to reflect on such a characteristic phenomenon since, apart from the fact that the 'balloon' of neo-figurative painting could burst at any moment, it represents a chapter in contemporary art that reveals the eternal questions and dilemmas of the history of art. The works discussed in my thesis evoke the stakes of the subversion of the modernist body, the contemporary relevance of the challenges of the modern subject, the tension between the logic and illogic of representation, the possible shapes of common intersections of pop-cultural and museum references, and the fascinating richness of the morphological invention that springs up in the landscape of modernism.

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