FIGURATIVELY SEEING

2009

MASSACHUSETTS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

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With references to the history of art and the tradition of figural painting, hints of allegory, and glances at film, the artists in Figuratively Seeing revel in the materiality of paint on canvas. The exhibition features work by contemporary artists who are examining – and in some cases redefining – figurative painting and portraiture. Although their focus is the human subject, instead of drawing from live sitters like traditional portrait painters, the artists employ multiple strategies to portray their chosen subjects.

Many of the artists, for example, have appropriated images and subjects from the Old Masters (Goya, Rembrandt, Rubens, Velázquez, Titian), German Expressionists (Kirchner, Nolde), French Symbolists (Moreau, Redon), and American Portraitists (Sargent, Copley, Stuart). Their anachronistic subjects beguile and seduce the viewer, transporting us into different worlds and times, where a bygone era can be experienced and painting's historic tradition can be felt. Although the historical subjects can seem eerily familiar, the artists insert cunning twists that render their work distinctly contemporary.

Using a different approach, some incorporate more recent elements from popular culture – film noir, graphic novels, photographs, and horror movies – to create ambiguous canvases with awkward interiors, sinister Technicolor vignettes, or odes to ambiguous loves. Loosely adhering to the tenets of realism or perspective in their works, verisimilitude takes a backseat to the imagined, the atmospheric, and the uncanny.

Finally, the artists in Figuratively Seeing deftly manipulate the properties and materiality of their medium. They explore the metaphor between flesh and paint while employing unorthodox or varied techniques such as acrylic on glue or watercolor staining on canvas.

Though the works in the exhibition share a common subject, the artists impart meanings beyond the figures themselves. Their portrayals of people help us see more than the literal or corporeal body or an individual's personality. The paintings provide a window into society; our past; and our physical, emotional, and spiritual selves.

Dorian Dreams, Dorian Dilemmas

ANN WILSON LLOYD

"A portrait is a picture in which there is just a tiny little something not quite right about the mouth," John Singer Sargent supposedly said.[1] Sargent grew to deplore the genre for which he became rich and famous. Having to satisfy the vanity of his prominent sitters was probably a drag. Their eternal presence in his studio was likely as annoying.

Portraiture and figurative painting in general have evolved and devolved from late 19th century sensitivities when a masterful portrait was deemed to be a window on the sitter's soul, an idea popularized by Oscar Wilde's classic morality tale, *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* Wilde's fable upsets the natural order, in that as the protagonist Dorian leads an increasingly decadent life he stays young and handsome while his portrait does the aging for him. Things violently reverse themselves in the story's melodramatic climax.

One wonders how Wilde might have devised Dorian's fate given the current state of portraiture, where one can email a JPEG to assembly-line technicians in China and order up an oil-on-canvas likeness.[2] Even pricey, latter-day Sargents, today's would-be society painters, advertise on the Internet and work mostly from photos. Instead of hiding his despised eroding image, Dorian could have easily ordered up a new one every month or so.

Photography's role in eliminating the sitter is far from the only change in figurative painting. Aspects of low and high culture have infiltrated the practice just as they have influenced painting and the avant-garde in general. Late 20th century developments like Pop and conceptual art, plus social forces like civil rights, the feminist movement, and gender issues have become deeply embedded in contemporary art practices, so much so that rarely is an avant-garde portrait or figure painting a straightforward depiction. Gathered under postmodernism's infinitely expandable tent, these art world and social movements have implanted meanings and codes to render contemporary figurative painting far more complex than a mere showcase for bravado technique.

Broadly speaking, the exhibition Figuratively Seeing, featuring eleven contemporary figurative painters, samples recent diverse ways the genre has branched out from its traditional, or museum-worthy, roots in profiling the notable. But more specifically, this exhibition's selection represents trends stemming from postmodernism's initial aesthetic turn toward popular culture and other influences, undertaken by painting about forty years ago. Indeed,

in many of the folks portrayed in these pictures viewers might see less resemblance to those immortalized on museum walls and more kinship to people depicted in popular imagery like comics and advertising, or even to the kitsch, campy, weird and/or hapless creatures in graffiti and thrift shop and yard sale paintings.

These common-folk found-object images have been messing with the muses of avant-garde figurative painters since the late 1960s, when Philip Guston shocked his fellow Abstract Expressionists by reverting from pure abstraction to flatly drawn, thick-lined imagery resembling crude cartoons. Guston's goofy characters were cone-shaped figures like hooded KKK types or they were grizzled potato-headed self-portraits, often surrounded by whiskey bottles, trash, severed limbs, and cigarette butts.[3] Such rawness reflected the artist's own emotions in a futile and tumultuous time. According to Guston, "The Vietnam War was what was happening in America, the brutality of the world… There was nothing to do now but paint my life… If someone bursts out laughing in front of my painting, that is exactly what I want and expect."[4]

Guston is often cited as the progenitor of the next phase of figurative painting, which was not formally recognized until 1978 when art world reaction to exhibitions at two New York

Philip Guston, *City Limits*, 1969, Oil on canvas, 77 x 103.2 inches Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, NY; Gift of Musa Gordon, 393.1991

1   John Singer Sargent, quoted in *The Penguin Thesaurus of Quotations*, M.J. Penguin Books, London, 1999, p. 416.

2   Playing on ideas of authenticity and originality, the Boston conceptual artist Joe Zane showed a series of oil portraits in 2006 of notorious European art forgers, all rendered from published images that Zane sent to assembly-line artists in China via the website www.royal-painting.com. The exhibition was held at Boston's Allston Skirt Gallery. (*right:* **Joe Zane**, *Hans Van Meegeren*, 2005, 16 x 20 inches, Oil on canvas, Courtesy Carroll and Sons, Boston)

3   Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1996, pp. 196–197.

4   Ibid., p. 196.

museums codified the movement. The predominantly figurative exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, provocatively titled *"Bad" Painting*, featured fourteen artists, who, according to the 1978 press release, "consciously reject traditional concepts of draftsmanship in favor of personal styles of figuration."[5] Marcia Tucker, the museum's director and curator of the exhibition, further explained that:

"Bad" Painting was an ironic title for 'good' painting, which is characterized by deformation of the figure, a mixture of art-historical and non-art resources, and fantastic and irreverent content. In its disregard for accurate representation and its rejection of conventional attitudes about art, 'bad' painting is at once funny and moving, and often scandalous in its scorn for the standards of good taste.[6]

Of the New Museum's fourteen "bad" artists, only Neil Jenney and William Wegman went on to further recognition, and of the two, only Jenney continued to be known primarily for painting. (Though the tone of Wegman's Weimaraner photos certainly meshes with Tucker's definition of "bad" painting.) *"Bad" Painting* was memorable, according to the art historian Irving Sandler, mostly for its title, the ideas Tucker articulated in the catalog, and "their timely entry into art discourse..."[7]

New Image Painting, at the Whitney Museum of American Art later that same year, was a slightly different take on the surge of figuration in painting. Its ten artists had Minimalism on their minds, with their crude or cartoonish figures mostly floating in monochrome color fields. Neil Jenney was included here as well as Susan Rothenberg and Robert Moskowitz. The *New Image* painters were lumped into the "bad" category by contemporary critics, along with emerging painters not in either show, like Robert Colescott and Jonathan Borofsky. Thus was declared a new style of figurative and narrative art in blatant reaction to the previous prominence of abstraction and Minimalism.

Sandler summed it up:

Working in the interface between abstraction and figuration, the New Image *painters rejected the recently established realist styles, notably the new perceptual realism of Philip Pearlstein and the photorealism of Chuck Close and Richard Estes. They scrupulously avoided literalist rendering and the artful look of 'good' drawing and painting, the kind taught in art schools, a look that in their opinion had become banal and academic. Instead they cultivated the appearance of crudity and ineptness. Their painting was not bad, of course, but 'bad,' meaning 'good.'*[8]

Neo-expressionism was a semi-consecutive and more international figurative movement of the late 1970s and early

1980s, featuring German artists like Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke, and Georg Baselitz, the Italians Sandro Chia and Francesco Clemente, and in the U.S., Jean-Michel Basquiat, Eric Fischl, David Salle, and Julian Schnabel. The style shared "bad" painting's rawness of technique and subjectivity but lacked, perhaps, the overt humor. The paintings were big, brazen, and bawdy. They featured mixed and layered imagery from popular culture and art history, were often charged with doom and violence, ironic narrative and/or soft porn, and sometimes stuck about with embellishments like broken crockery and straw. They also possessed the least concern to date with actual draftsmanship.

Neo-expressionism seemed to both flaunt and flout it all; this was painting "bad" to the bone. It drove the critics wild and art prices up. Many of the original ideas from "bad" and *New Image* painting styles were folded into Neo-expressionism, which became the catch-all definition for 1980s figurative painting. The critic Sanford Schwartz, writing in a 1986 essay on the Neo-expressionists and the return of figuration, theorized thus: "It is as if this were a period that wants to reintroduce heroes in paintings — wants to bring back the figure — and yet wants to show the not always substantial thoughts of these heroes."[9]

Lisa Yuskavage, *The Ones That Don't Want To: Bad Baby*, 1991
Oil on linen, 34 x 30 inches, Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner, NY

5   *"Bad" Painting* New Museum of Contemporary Art press release, 1978, www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/26/bad_painting.

6   Ibid.

7   Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1996, p. 198.

8   Ibid. p. 195.

9   Sanford Schwartz, essay "Polke's Dots, or, a Generation Comes Into Focus," in *Artists and Writers*, Yarrow Press, New York, 1990, p. 196.

By the 1990s, whacked-out figuration (prominently exemplified by art stars Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin, both of whom have roots in Neo-expressionism) was solidly mainstream, and remains so today, when there seems to be less need to classify the practice within any particular movement. Permission to get more than the mouth wrong has forever been granted, but getting it right is okay too. Today, acclaimed painters like Gerhard Richter, Jenny Saville, and Elizabeth Peyton can safely portray their subjects in realistic, painterly, or sensitive means and still be considered avant-garde.

Figurative painting may still be a window on the soul, but not that of the individual soul portrayed. Sometimes it may reflect the soul of society; sometimes just the soul of the art world. Either way, the social upheavals that worked their tumultuous way through the last century paved the way for a moment cleverly described by curator Douglas Fogle. In an essay for the 2001 Walker Art Center exhibition, *Painting at the End of the World*, Fogle wrote "painting's traditional function as a window on the world has been circumvented, or rather someone has left the window open and a number of things have crawled in."[10]

With strict verisimilitude beside the point, artists today can look to imagery and paintings "bad" and very, very good for new ways of seeing ourselves. There are claimed and unclaimed links between the eleven artists in Figuratively Seeing and anything figurative in today's popular culture such as animation, cartoons, graphic novels, and photography, as well as to the canon of figurative masters. Given the plethora of sources and absence of rules, it is interesting how many of today's figurative painters overtly channel the art historical past. In this exhibition, five out of eleven do so more and less directly: David Ording, Hannah Barrett, Jerónimo Elespe, Bettina Sellmann, and Bénédicte Peyrat.

David Ording (page 50), a skilled replicator of old master technique, pursues verisimilitude because his conceptual ploy depends upon it. In these examples of his work, Ording redresses the idea of what makes historic painting notable, while he re-dresses, literally, the figures in famously familiar historical portraits into contemporary guises. These subjects have been relieved of some of their fusty, vintage quaintness, their bejeweled royal get-ups, and their satiny Gilded Age refinement, revealing faces that are, oddly, even more familiar.

Ording's T-shirted rendition of Sargent's *Lady Agnew* seems less cosseted, younger, and a lot more devilish than the original, even though her face and her furnishings are almost verbatim. Without their noble trappings, Spain's famously inbred Habsburgs just look developmentally

challenged. Modern garb strips away a lot of myth, and Ording's simple, funny, but deftly credible costume changes let us ponder how easily myth turns doctrinaire.

Hannah Barrett (page 20), too, often recruits her subjects from art history, and in one close-to-home series here, quotes Boston's favorite artist son, John Singleton Copley. Barrett experiments in Copley's semi-primitive style, by gender-blending traditional pendant portraits of colonial dames and squires. Results are odd, freakish, and entirely appropriate for the genre. Due to limits of itinerant limners less skilled than Copley, couples in most historical examples typically had identical features; their faces were mirror images of the same frozen, stern demeanor. Barrett thrusts these early American icons into postmodern issues of gender identity, making one wonder who really wore the pants in these straitlaced relationships.

It would be great if Barrett's folks could meet up with the brooding, androgynous-looking people in Jerónimo Elespe's (page 30) two small paintings on aluminum panel. Like Barrett's, Elespe's figurative subjects seem caught in the collapsing wrinkles of time; they are from both then and now. Elespe's spooky visages seem to swim up out of their shimmery-dull surfaces in the two specimens, *Tio R.* and *Mari S.*

John Singer Sargent, *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw*, 1892, Oil on canvas 61.8 x 52.5 inches, Courtesy National Gallery of Scotland

10 Douglas Fogle, "The Trouble with Painting," curator's essay in the exhibition catalog *Painting at the End of the World*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, February–May 2001, p. 22.

Elespe, too, works obsessively, applying tiny brush strokes over long periods, gradually building to an enamel-like finish. The technique results in an object that is romantic, precious, and personal, in spirit much like miniature keepsake portraits on ivory. Yet these go beyond nostalgic likenesses. They are reflections in a tarnished mirror, a reversal of Ording's conceit of bringing historic subjects forward. These instead sink the present into the past.

Bettina Sellmann (page 58) also uses interesting technique to play with time and summon subjective responses to popular art and art history. Her washy watercolor-on-canvas subjects are frequently baroque and romantic; they are quaintly dated and reminiscent of kitschy things like figurines and cheap prints that, not so long ago, accented grandmother's ersatz-*Louis Quinze* parlor decor.

But Sellmann's dissolving images also have a poignant air. They gaze directly at the viewer even as they fade away. The aristocratic mademoiselle in *Choker* (2007) seems particularly dismayed, as if aware that, despite her finery and elaborate toilette, she has been left out in the rain. Knowing as we do what happened to French aristocrats of the Baroque era, these portraits also read clearly as *memento mori*. Sellmann's playful way of exploiting a modernist technique of stained canvas, combined with her fascination

of painting from well-worn images, has paradoxically given these clichéd subjects new life as ghostly presences.

Historical style, less than subject matter, is the icon of choice for Bénédicte Peyrat (page 54), and she crams it all in. Her paintings of ample nudes and bulbous faces set in dark, brushy spaces and vague landscapes are composites of art history's greatest hits of figurative painting—Rubens, Rembrandt, Renoir, Van Dyke, Gainsborough, etc. Peyrat's people are not pretty, they lack all pretensions and the artist does not furnish them any, save from giving them an old world setting and the honor of appearing as latter day equivalents of subjects like, say, Rembrandt's *Saskia* or Rubens' *Hélène Fourment*. Otherwise, these are everyday faces and bodies, as seen at the mall.

Peyrat is one of several figurative painters working in the flesh trade, or rather, trading on the conceptual idea of paint as a metaphor of flesh. Like contemporaries Hanneline Røgeberg and Jenny Saville, she revels in unidealized forms and features, the ordinary human condition, manifested in lush, liquid, painterly methods that seduce by surface juiciness though the image itself may actually repel.

If the prior five artists exemplify current ways of revisiting and layering art history, the next three – Keith Mayerson, Jason Teraoka, and André Ethier – seem more directly tied

to their antecedents from "bad" painting, taking their cultural cues from the lowest of lowbrow imagery. But they might claim kinship with decades-earlier "high" art figurative crudeness as well. As strange as their figures might seem, they are firmly rooted in a twentieth century art historical lineup that includes the Fauvists, Dada, Surrealism, and German Expressionism, right on through to the Neo-expressionists.

Like Sellmann, Keith Mayerson (page 46) mines subjects that are iconic to the point of being clichéd, but his are more recent celebrities. His deliberate thrift-shop-painting style highlights the fact that his subjects — Judy Garland, Martin Luther King, Jr. — and the way he renders them are both ultimately populist products: celebrated, revered, and distorted by and for the people. There is something freakish about devoted fans and a lot that is freaky about celebrity. Note how this depiction of a young Judy Garland makes her look as if her features are already edging apart, slightly askew, center not holding.

Tragic figures from modern times, like King and Anne Frank, as examined by Mayerson's yard-sale style, seem to flaunt the banality of how society has processed and overprocessed their fate. But ultimately these images also work to neutralize their symbolism—something of a kindness, one can not help thinking.

Hanneline Røgeberg, *Service*, 1999, Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Jason Teraoka's (page 62) small jewel-like images, on the other hand, are of normal-ish looking people, strung out more likely by their own pulp-fiction plots. The works themselves are intimate and book-sized in scale; their thick object-like panels and canvas supports are similarly haptic. Glazed surfaces add to their cover-art appeal, as does the deliberate empathy Teraoka's masterful technique invokes in these faces. What are their stories; how does it end? We have to know.

Teraoka gives everyday drama the high luxe treatment with his enameled-looking finishes, glitter, and metallic paints. Even his titles (*Hero, Venus, My Friend*) often elevate these characters beyond their sad, tormented mien. *Cut and Paste*, on the other hand, with its suspenseful over-the-shoulder camera view, seems ready-made to cover a Stephen King novel. That benign pink wall, that mysterious closed door, those menacing shears—this one, we know, ends badly.

Repulsion wrapped in slick surfaces is pushed farther by André Ethier, (page 34) whose cast of grotesqueries includes a bearded lady in a Chanel suit and trademark Jackie Kennedy pillbox hat (untitled, as are all his works included here). Ethier's paint-handling goes beyond the self-conscious realism of painterly expressions of flesh; he uses paint as if it were Sculpey, to scratch, mold, and model into high-relief components.

Ethier professes an interest in ancient Celtic myth but legends of the psychedelic '60s seem to be an even stronger source. His acid palette; graffiti-like drawing; faces, garb, and scenes suggestive of a young Janice Joplin or frolicking flower children conjure up some seriously tripped-out visions. Even more currently, they seem in cahoots with gleeful deviants conjured by non-painters R. Crumb and Paul McCarthy.

The remaining three artists in Figuratively Seeing — Vera Iliatova, Holly Coulis, and Chris Faust — are engaged with some of the more conventional painting fictions, most currently reminiscent of Elizabeth Peyton and Gerhard Richter. Their styles veer between pictorial illusionism and cinematic or flat photographic effects, sometimes employing both in the same work, but they also quote early Modernism and mid-20th century realism.

Vera Iliatova's (page 42) small sketchy paintings are like film stills, though they are composed with perspective and casual modeling to suggest depth of field. Her stop-action, impressionistic groups of young women are unsettling, especially when one girl is sprawled on the ground like a crime victim while her companions seem oblivious. The paintings of Balthus (that notorius Nabokovian voyeur) come to mind, but so do Cézanne's bathing groups. Iliatova

skillfully manages to blend the weight of freighted narrative, à la Eric Fischl, with early modernist painting concerns.

The slightly stiff and awkward young men in Holly Coulis's (page 26) *Speedo* also recall Balthus – refigured from across the gender divide – but more specifically, Cezanne's famous underwear-clad *Large Bather* from 1885. Coulis's other figures, all of whom are in interior settings, are less literally exposed; we must, in fact, work to extract these people from their clothing, pets, and wallpaper. These busy, somewhat claustrophobic environments demand attention, drawing the eye as much as the faces do. Done in a flat, defined style that resembles "camo" patterns or exaggerated paint-by-number kits, they seem to both protect and obliterate the figures within a unified picture plane, a Neo-expressionist ploy of making all elements of equal value.[11] Without being overtly photorealist, she deftly emulates the way digital photographs can leave no field unfocused, making it hard to know where to look.

Chris Faust (page 38) more directly summons photographic style (and more directly shields his subjects) with his snapshot-like compositions of figures, seen only from the back of the head, mostly in nature. His subjects, all young women, seem to have turned away at the wrong moment. We are left to consider the shiny, flowing naturalism of
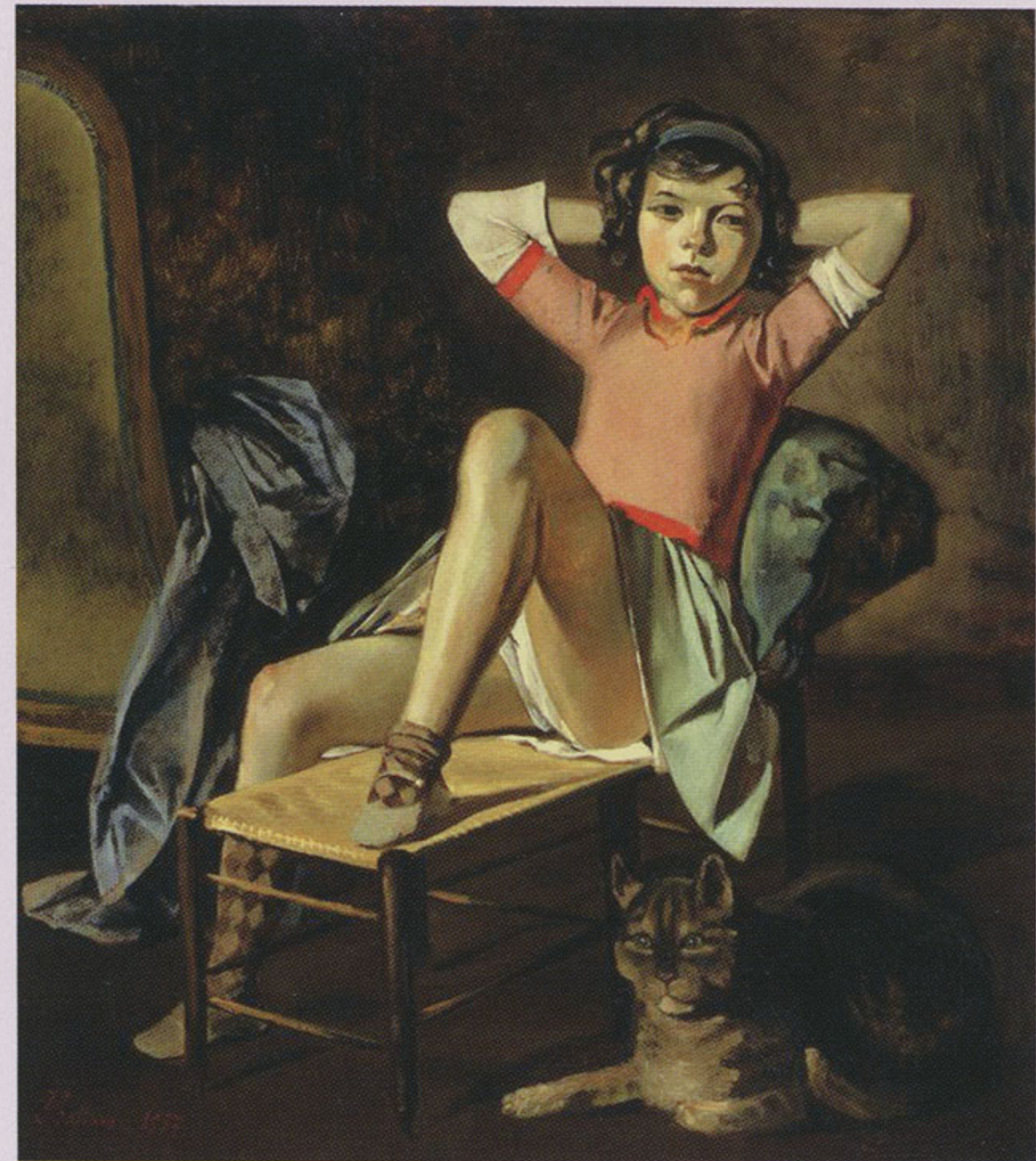
Balthus, *Girl with Cat*, 1937, Oil on board, 34.5 x 30.5 inches
Courtesy Art Institute of Chicago; The Lindy and Edwin Bergman
Collection, 1991.595

11 Schwartz, p.196. Speaking of the all-over canvas treatment of work by Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and other Neo-expressionists, Schwartz writes: "After looking at these pictures, you may see earlier artists, even Old Masters, differently. You may find yourself 'bringing forward' the backgrounds of paintings, and reading backgrounds and foregrounds as a sort of blinking, throbbing surface."

pony-tailed heads, which the faux-camera has supposedly focused upon, while whatever the subjects themselves are focusing on is either vaguely blurred, abstracted, or monochrome. This kind of self-referential subtext has become a postmodern guise for narrative.

With this strategy, Faust, unlike Sargent, will have no trouble with his subjects' mouths. Indeed, the few art historical figures presented this way have become clichés, ripe for parody (The Simpsons's Mr. Burns was once posed as Andrew Wyeth's *Christina*). Almost as ubiquitous to a contemporary art viewer is Gerhard Richter's well-known, turned-away portrait of his daughter Betty, which these more likely bring to mind. Deliberately mining a cliché can bring rewards for artists and viewers. Confronting ubiquity and tweaking it forces another look, and in these, for both subject and viewer, it is only about looking, never knowing—which can be a big relief. We may be vaguely frustrated and affronted at being given the cold shoulder, but we are also spared another face-to-face confrontation.

Looking directly at the human figure will always fascinate and always be fraught. Social consciousness-raising has made us look — and look again — at our own process of looking, and contemporary artists have both prodded and mirrored those collective responses. The feminist movement forever implicated the traditional "male gaze," a censure Lisa

Yuskavage set about sending up. Artists continue to issue conceptual indictments, aimed either toward valorizing: Kehinde Wiley's epic-scale portraits of young black men, Jenny Saville's lush paintings of ample-sized women; or skewering: John Currin's needling parodies of the privileged intelligentsia (those most likely to be looking at his art).

In the past, it was paintings of figures, primarily, that have shocked, scandalized, and sidelined careers. The artists in Figuratively Seeing know, or at least intuit, that regardless of art world edicts or lack thereof, regardless of its banal ubiquity, figuration is powerful; that embedded deep in the psyche is an undercurrent of myth, magic, and taboo regarding our own likeness, flowing from the Garden of Eden to Narcissus; from Dorian Gray to the Taliban's 2001 blasting of the Buddhas of Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan. The narrative culture is likewise filled with evil twins and doppelgängers, wreaking havoc. If, for the artist, every portrait is essentially a self-portrait, for the viewer, every image is a mirror-image. And replicating the self, whether idealized or warts-and-all, is our fondest desire and our worst nightmare.

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Gerhard Richter, *Betty*, 1988, Oil on canvas
40.25 x 28.5 inches Courtesy Saint Louis Art Museum