

8 PAINTERS ON PAINTING

Text by Jennifer Higgie

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At a time of revolution in digital technologies, when making extraordinary images has never been technically easier, painting persists. Jennifer Higgie asked eight artists to share their thoughts on the whys and wherefores of figurative painting

I Ellen Altfest

Why paint? There's no good reason. It's something I'm driven to do. I'd like to make something that is both of its time and that stands outside of it. Traditional painting is a handmade process built over time and has a physical presence. It is an accumulation of gestures, colours and textures. The painted mark is at once a thing in itself and the thing that it describes. In this way, a viewer is always conscious of the painting's making. The speed of the mark, fast or slow, and the time it takes to make a work become part of its meaning. Looking over a long time is like an attempt to merge with something outside of oneself. The dense accumulation of visual information, which is the product of this kind of looking, is different from how the lens and the eye usually see the world.

Painting is subjective. There is a kind of alchemy that happens when the visual information moves from the eye or mind to the brush. It's an intuitive process. Achieving a likeness isn't interesting in itself, it's more of an entry point. A good portrait, for example, tells you what the person was like or how the artist viewed them. What the artist thinks or feels, consciously or unconsciously, is embedded in the work. Painting both represents the world and creates its own world. A viewer can, figuratively, enter a painting and occupy that space. A painting speaks about something lasting outside of the flux of daily life. As people, this is what what we connect with.

I am fine with the term 'figurative painter' as a shorthand to describe my work. I tend to use the term

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‘representational’ because it seems more open-ended. I think my works are more about conveying a personal or idiosyncratic perspective rather than making a specific statement.

Was becoming a figurative painter motivated by a desire for my pictures to be easily read? No. Recognition and accessibility are different things. I am interested in creating something with no defined interpretation. I would like my work to slow the viewer down and delay the moment of understanding.

Ellen Alfest lives and works in New York, USA. Her work was included in ‘The Encyclopedic Palace’, the 55th Venice Biennale, Italy.

2 Apostolos Georgiou

Why did I become a painter? In a family where my father is a pianist, my stepfather loves and plays music, and others are involved professionally in the arts, it was almost impossible to escape! Of course, it could have been another form of art: music is actually my favourite, but that would have meant going to the conservative, boring music school. All other forms of art were more complicated, especially in a town like Thessaloniki in the 1960s where the possibilities were limited. Painting is also something very simple to start: a piece of paper, a pencil, a few colours and let’s go!

When I was 17, I decided that I was a painter. Everything I saw was transformed in my brain into a painted surface. I don’t think there has ever been another period in my life when the image concerned me so much; it was only in my sleep that I thought of other things. I observed paintings in the flesh and in books, trying to understand and digest their good and bad qualities.

The way we read art makes it political or not. Isn’t it the same in life, generally? Many of us need to overcome, or at least distinguish, injustice and inequality, whether we are the victims or the abusers. In my family, among our friends and in the world generally, things function in the same way: only the scale changes. Either we see this or we pretend that it doesn’t exist. A vase of flowers can convey the same kind of drama – a box of emotions ready to explode at any moment – as a face. A painting must have the tension to provoke us to look at it; to wake us up from a state of indifference. Then the rest will come.

The term figurative painter annoys me. Of course, it’s a way to distinguish one type of painting from another, but I think it’s badly used. Perhaps because when I started to paint, a figurative painter was considered the only real painter because he could paint things to make them look the way they are. I wanted to react to this closed environment, and it was hard to accept, and to be accepted, for that. In fact,

I wanted to be an abstract painter – a Jackson Pollock, a Mark Rothko, a Brice Marden or a Christopher Wool – to go directly to the substance of the real thing, but my character didn't allow me to do so. We can't choose what we want to be; we have to accept who we are. I know very well that the solution, the big adventure of any kind of expression, is hiding behind idols, words and sounds. Since I have to use people in my paintings, at least I let them paint their abstract compositions.

Apostolos Georgiou lives in Athens, Greece. In 2013, his work was included in exhibitions at deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens, and the 4th Thessaloniki Biennale, Greece. This year, he will have solo shows at GB agency, Paris, France; and Rodeo Gallery.

3 Imran Qureshi

I graduated from National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan, in 1993, after specializing in the traditional technique of miniature painting. The course was very academic and disciplined. My first work was a copy of a miniature painting of the Kangra School. I rendered the background of a female figure with a tiny, hand-made, squirrel-hair brush in order to gradually build up the tones. I had never dreamed that I would be able to work so patiently.

The day I completed my first Gud Rang (opaque watercolour) miniature painting, I felt a great sense of achievement and started loving the process; it was so meditative. At the same time, I began using paint in a completely different way. I was more comfortable with a water-based medium and always enjoyed its organic flow. I only realized later that, historically, this was actually 'our' medium and oil paint was introduced to the subcontinent by the West.

My paintings are a continuation of a traditional art form. When I was studying, the aim was to master the technique and learn certain skills by reproducing historical paintings. By the time we were in our final year, we were allowed to make our own work, while still employing the traditional techniques and elements of miniature painting. Since graduating in 1993, everything I have created has been directly or indirectly linked with these traditions, whether it's on a piece of paper or a large-scale installation on the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

I represent the body in my work in two completely different ways. One is in my figurative miniature paintings, which I made after asking myself: 'What is contemporary miniature painting all about?' The first work I made in response to this question was *Mussawir ka chota bhai* (My Younger Brother) in 1995. Before this painting, I was investigating the same question by juxtaposing figurative images from

traditional miniature paintings. Later on, I continued painting figures in my series including 'Moderate Enlightenment' (2006–09) and 'Portrait' (2009).

I also represent bodies in a more abstract and performance-based way; at times there is no literal presence of a body but a strong sense of 'someone' in these works. For my traditionally painted miniature paintings I always use a photographic source, but the way I transform and stylize the figure and its background completely changes the original meaning. So, in both approaches, my use of the figure is completely different to the photographic representation of it.

I am surprised when people describe me as a 'figurative painter'. I would never categorize myself in that way. What is important for me is that the work has some kind of narrative, even if the imagery is completely abstract and non-figurative. I think perhaps this is due to my strong affiliation with miniature painting, in which storytelling is an essential element.

Every morning, since childhood, as soon as I wake up I read the newspaper. I have always been interested in my country and its politics and it's a habit that has influenced my art practice. In 1990, on my first day at art school, there was a pile of chairs in the middle of the studio. Our professor, Salima Hashmi, asked us to draw it as a still life. Due to my connection with Hyderabad city – which was a site of demonstrations, road blocks and general daily violence – I understood 'still life' in a completely different way. Instead of choosing a white sheet of paper, like my classmates, I chose that day's newspaper, which was full of news about unrest and agitations, and drew the piles of chairs on that. It was my first work of art in that school. My work reflects whatever is happening around me, whether socially, politically, personally or emotionally.

Imran Qureshi lives in Lahore, Pakistan. In 2013, he was awarded Deutsche Bank's 'Artist of the Year', and had solo exhibitions at the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma, Rome, Italy; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA; and the Zahoor Al Akhlaq Gallery, Lahore. His work was also included in 'The Encyclopedic Palace' at the 55th Venice Biennale. In 2014, he will have a solo exhibition at Ikon, Birmingham, UK.

4 Helen Johnson

Painting is a space for the critical deployment of ambiguity, wit, failure and unknowing. Being a painter today doesn't mean seeing painting as some kind of anachronistic refuge, or thinking that the modernist project of the medium can be rehabilitated, or even continue to be flogged. I am interested in the complexities, loadings and problems of painting as devices for producing meaning today, informed by a new range of conditions. I am not interested in using painting to defend itself, make statements or draw conclusions,

but to open spaces for reflective thought, where a multiplicity of positions can be recognized, particularly as a means of resisting the imposition of a fixed narrative.

In terms of an art-historical conversation, I feel connected to some strategies of postwar German painting because I think they can be of use in Australia today as a means of addressing this country's fraught and unresolved relationship to history since colonization: for instance, the paintings Martin Kippenberger produced during the mid-80s, when he mobilized painting's complexities in the service of a broader cultural critique. In an Australian context, I see these sorts of strategies in the work of Juan Davila, Geoff Lowe/*A Constructed World*, Raquel Ormella, and Kate Smith, for example.

Increasingly, I shift toward an ambiguous treatment of the figure, away from anything that might be read as a portrait, in favour of bodies that have been cobbled together, their heads adapted from fragments, their clothing stamped onto the canvas using actual clothes that define their dimensions. They are not knowable people, but are more like stand-ins for subjects, usually life-sized or larger. The scale invites something like a social engagement, and the figures, resisting being reduced to depiction, reflect the viewer back at themselves, making them think about their own position.

Painting is freighted with what I think of as productive neuroses: its status as an emblem of bourgeois cultural production, the idea of it as anachronistic, its readiness for commodity status – these things are residual in the medium itself and can be used to make meaning.

The space between figuration and abstraction is slippery. I think one can choose whether to plot a point between them but it is a more open, individual decision than it once was. 'Figurative painter' is still a dirty phrase in some circles but I think that's a reason to take it on. The role of politics in my practice attaches to the question of whether there can be a politics of the spectator, as Hannah Arendt proposed, or whether politics requires action. As Rosemary Trockel once said: 'Art works on the continuation of politics by other means. But direct change through art is probably more like a fairy tale worth believing in.' For me, painting does not constitute a political action as such, but can offer distance from the established narrative, can change our sense of ourselves in the world. Painting figuratively certainly has to do with making pictures that are easily engaged with: this can open up the way to a contemplation of more difficult ideas.

Helen Johnson lives and works in Melbourne, Australia. In 2013, she had a solo show at Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, and was in a joint exhibition with Parker Ito at Prism, Los Angeles, USA. Her exhibition at Minerva, Sydney, Australia, opens in May.

5 Henry Taylor

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Like most kids, I grew up with very few real role models. The thing I always wanted to be was an athlete: first a football player, then a baseball player like my cousin, Don Buford. But when I was diagnosed with a benign tumour and had to have a metal plate put in my head in the 11th grade, I gave that dream up. My mother always told me ‘put your best foot forward’, so I tried acting, then I tried something else and eventually I started painting and that was largely because of Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez who had their own comic book called *Love and Rockets* (1982–96). In junior high school I began making art and I simply returned to the subject or thing in life I loved the most – well, almost the most.

Not that I’m well known or anything, but the fact that I’m black (and there’s not that many of us) and have had some exposure doesn’t automatically mean that I’ll be included in ‘art-historical conversation’. If you’re not relevant, no-one’s going to give a damn. Being relevant, I feel, has perhaps given me some access to Tupac, Biggie, Gil Scott-Heron, Lead Belly, Basquiat, David Hammons, Kendrick Lamar (my daughter Jade likes Kendrick and so do I), Miles – black artists who were and are relevant and bring something to the ‘art-historical’ table where people often do a lot of talking.

I like the term ‘figurative painter’ more than some of the things I’ve been called (that’s if you’re trying to label me a figurative painter). I make all types of paintings that have figures in them but the figure is behind bars or walking a pitbull or a mastiff, like in my work *Walking with Vito* (2008). Or, for example, I made a painting about my grandfather, Ardmore Taylor, who everyone called Mo, and who trained horses in Texas. He’s sitting on a porch with a pistol and shotgun, alluding to the lifestyle he lived as well as died: he was shot at the age of 33 in 1933. Years earlier, he had his arm shot off as a result of some white people trying to steal his horses. My grandmother poured kerosene on his arm and bandaged it up and he got on his horse to look for the folks who tried to rob him. He was ambushed and killed on a dark road in Texas and my father (an only child, who was nine at the time) went with my grandmother and picked up his body and took him home. I know the story well because my father would drink and often call me in the middle of the night; maybe he was woken up by the memory of that night, but he’d call out as if the incident was taking place right then. There are six boys in my family; I’m the youngest and whenever my dad introduced us to his friends he’d say: ‘Meet my bullets.’ He was referring to the last three, as we were close in age; the older three I never hung with. So, I try to say a little more, i.e. I paint a figure, but often times there’s more to it. It’s like a JUNGLE SOMETIMES.

What role does politics play in my work? Well, you talking to me? This is America and if you’re black in America it’s easy for politics to permeate your work. As a journalism student, I developed a habit of reading every page of the newspaper looking for source material for my art works. I did a painting called

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Homage to a Brother (2007) after reading about a young African-American brother named Sean Bell who was murdered. I didn't know when or if I'd even use an image of him, but I did. I woke up one morning before a show I had at the Studio Museum in Harlem and picked up the newspaper clipping and said to myself, 'that could have been my son, or my nephew', but I felt it was the thing to do since I was going to New York and Sean was from Queens and was passionate about baseball. That was my green light. Represent Baby Baabay! My show last year at Blum & Poe was inspired by my life, and those around me and those before me. In one room I painted portraits of black sharecroppers, but there was a door with 'Principal's Office' on it, as that's where I received my early indoctrination to being treated unfairly, as the teacher always found a reason to send me to the office or put me in the closet as punishment. The last room in that exhibition was the 'Probation Office'. This is what I know – and a lot of black males know – about incarceration. So, my life is political and full of love. Dear momma!

My community means a lot to me. If I made abstract paintings I would get no love from my family or peeps. I can easily elaborate but I think by now if anyone's reading this article they know 'Brenda's got a baby'. (That's a song by Tupac.)

Henry Taylor lives in Los Angeles, USA. In 2013, he had a solo show at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, and his work was included in 'The Beer Show', The Green Gallery, Milwaukee, USA; 'Body Language', Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, usa; the 2013 Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, USA; and 'Contemporary Galleries: 1980 – Now', Museum of Modern Art, New York. His solo exhibition at untitled, New York, opens in March.

6 Mark Sadler

Painting gives me a sense of the world as I've lived it, since I paint about experiences and encounters. I meet my several selves somewhere in the midst of painting: one is a kind of itinerant intellectual who wants to use painting to make a point about history, culture and language; the other is a hollow shell through which painting passes, making weird noises as it goes.

When you paint, you're in competition with painters of the past. You say to them: 'It was easier for you. There was less competition from other art forms, lucky bastards!' You confront art history attempting to do something almost impossible: to interrupt its voracious flow with your own subjective sense of the world hoping to obtain a result that will feel active and not subservient to the past. This process can be humbling, since the paintings of artists you most admire continually rise up in the midst of your own work.

When I paint, the figures – which are always recollections of experiences and never simply images absorbed through visual grazing – are amongst the least solid or most volatile of any element. Photography does a particularly good job of representing the surface of a body – the wrinkles, bruises and faded tattoos – but my approach is to step away from those levels of information. People are the least permanent things in the world, moving through it and leaving behind the solid phenomena of chairs, rooms and windows for the next lot to inhabit. With that in mind, I construct my figures in line or as silhouettes, thinking mostly about movement and translucency. The resultant schematic shells are there for the viewer to inhabit, rather than as symbolic protagonists to animate a narrative. I work from life, from memory, from sketches or using photographs as *aide-mémoires*.

Our perception has many subjective filters – the mind, the body, the memory – and because of painting's huge range of possibilities from representation to pure abstraction, it has the ability to invent and find surprising new forms for non-visible phenomena. The coloured vectors that often traverse the space in my paintings, for example in *Breakers* (2012), are an unconscious outpouring that takes the form of a spatialized cosmic doodle.

I prefer being described as an 'artist' to a 'figurative painter', but please don't ask me to talk about my 'practice' unless you want me to refer you to my brother who is a dentist.

I chose to become an artist in order to live out a radical form of freedom, traversing different territories and languages, seeking to create a holding structure for cultural heterogeneity in my work. My earlier paintings stay true to a personal encounter but may also presently offer a passing geo-political topicality. *Seneca* (2010), however – a bunch of empty chairs in a public space – is a painting specifically about politics. The historian Jean-François Chevrier has spoken about 'the politics of the empty chair' in my work. These chairs hold a question about who might sit in them: I want to find a common space for anybody to enter, although I know not everybody will.

A figure seen from behind allows the viewer to access the picture in a direct way. This strategy makes the entry point to the picture easy enough. After that, other more complex registers reveal themselves gradually through sustained contemplation; philosophical, historical, mysterious and poetic layers that will hopefully coalesce into an experience of pleasure.

Mark Sadler is based in Glasgow, UK, and Berlin, Germany. In 2013, he had a solo show at Krome Gallery, and his work was included in 'Drifting' at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, both in Berlin. In 2014, he will present 'Symbolic

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7 Rose Wylie

I paint because it's exciting. Otherwise I'm not sure why I do it, except that it suits me and I like looking at pictures. You are on your own with a painting, from start to finish, and it's up to you where you are with it and art history ... so, it's something worthwhile to work for. I see my paintings continuing an art-historical conversation in every sense, from all of art history but particularly from the ancients; they are always so good.

Painting and photography have so much in common but one essential difference is that the camera usually needs something physical to photograph, whereas a painting can be a representation of something that isn't there yet, involving every sort of responsibility for choice and decision. And in the case of 'figurative' art, the original link is still in it to see. Also, in painting, there is the actual weight of paint rather than the appearance of weight, and without mechanical intervention there is more obvious authorship, which is good or bad, depending on how you see things.

Painting reveals a very close, direct authorship without relying upon the sumptuous qualities of what it's made from – plaster casts of stockings, wood, beautiful cardboard, etc. – all of which I like, but for painting it's over to you, in neutral paint, to get that sense of 'being' into the paintings, independent of extraneous help. 'Figurative painting' is a broad term, which distinguishes recognizable objects from abstraction, and I suppose it has its use, although, I think of what I do as 'painting'.

'Figurative painting' perhaps carries with it a reference to more academic work, which somewhat restricts the category.

Politics and other issues are often there, if you see it like that – some of my paintings have been called 'mediated political'. But that is not what they are about. I see a good photo in the paper (or television news) and use it for its visual/formal qualities, not the politics. The politics is why it's in the newspaper.

If people saw my work as 'easily read', then that is not something I would immediately object to – it depends what you define as 'easily read', and, importantly, whether that is all it is. After readability, I look for particularity, plus something more you can't quite put your finger on. In my

painting it's not the subject matter that needs to be known about – that doesn't matter. It is more the objects/things/persons that need to be recognized, felt and understood: trees as trees, a skirt as a skirt. Painting is not about generalities but particularities, and although whose (or which) particularities they are may not be recognized at once, I hope it is seen that they are there anyway: otherwise the 'look' would not be as it is. I feel a particular 'look' of, say, a leg, which gets you going in the first place, should strongly be there in the painting, otherwise there's no point. It is the move from legs-in-general to this leg that I would like people to get. There is none of this in abstraction.

Another route to particularity is to make a written description of a person (or tree), and then to illustrate that list in the painting. This allows a summing-up of observed particulars, but with another kind of visualization at work. So, it is about readability, but from a different-yet-linked beginning, with its own process: conceptual projection from a mental image. The result, the image, will be easily 'read', but the 'sideways jump' from direct observation to get there, would be less obvious.

Rose Wylie lives in Kent, UK. In 2013, her work was shown at Tate Britain, London, UK; Galerie Michael Janssen, Berlin, Germany; UNION Gallery, London; and Haugar Vestfold Kunstmuseum, Tønsberg, Norway. In 2014, she will have exhibitions at the Städtische Galerie, Wolfsburg, Germany; Vous Etes Ici, Amsterdam, the Netherlands; Choi & Lager Gallery, Cologne, Germany; and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, USA.

8 Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

I paint because I love doing it and because I never stop finding it difficult. Which is not to say that I find other things easy, but I always feel like I'm trying to get to somewhere that I'll never reach. That's the way it should feel or else there'd be no point. I'll keep trying to do it better, or more successfully, according to what I want from it. I'm rarely completely satisfied but that makes me more determined to carry on. These aren't reasons in a wide sense but they are my reasons.

The painted figure feels like flesh; something to do with feeling and sensuality. Oil paint on canvas has a very particular character, a combination of natural substances that don't sit well together. The canvas is sized with rabbit glue so that the oil in the primer and paint doesn't eat away at it, but paintings degrade over time (albeit decades or centuries) anyway. This character and behaviour of the medium itself always makes me think of the body or of people: degenerating and at odds with itself. It seems apt.

I think of painting as the means through which I present the world as I see or think or feel it: a combination of real and unreal. The fantasies, nonsenses and random associations in my head meld with the life I live and the things that happen around me. It is necessarily flawed, histrionic, emotional, intuitive, illogical, personal and largely lost when translated into words. I feel the same way about jazz. It's about seeing but more about feeling. Thinking through feeling. For me, the term 'figurative painter' is a more accurate description than 'portrait painter'.

Politics plays a large role in my work, but often less in terms of subject than object, the fact of doing what you're doing. How pretty can you afford to be? How ugly should you be? Should the pleasure ever be all yours? How ashamed are you? And who still has a good enough reason to paint? Politics of some shape or another underpin most work regardless of medium, but when one depicts the figure the questions raised will always be political.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye lives in London, UK. In 2013, she had solo shows at The Pinchuk Art Centre, Kiev, Ukraine; Corvi-Mora, London; and the Utab Museum of Fine Art, USA. She was shortlisted for the 2013 Turner Prize, and her work was included in group shows at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, Poland; David Zwirner, New York, USA; Victoria Miro, London; The Future Generation Art Prize, Venice, Italy; 'The Encyclopedic Palace', 55th Venice Biennale; and CEAAC, Strasbourg, Germany. This year, she will have a solo exhibition at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, UK.

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