

August 24, 2007

ART REVIEW | 'ALL THE MORE REAL'

Those Rumors of Painting's Death? Exaggerated

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

SOUTHAMPTON, N.Y. — Some battles in art are never fully resolved. Take the one over painting.

In “A Meditation on the Death of Painting,” a catalog essay for the current exhibition at the [Parrish Art Museum](#), the painter Eric Fischl, who organized the show with Merrill Falkenberg of the Parrish, mentions a 1968 article in *Art in America* announcing that painting was dead.

At that moment the claim carried some weight. Vito Acconci was biting himself and calling it “Trademarks.” A few years later, in the performance “Shoot,” a gun was fired at Chris Burden inside a gallery near Los Angeles. And two years after that, Carolee Schneeman performed “Interior Scroll” right down the road from the Parrish in East Hampton, reading from a little scroll pulled from her vagina.

“By the time you have artists doing bad things to themselves in the name of art,” Mr. Fischl writes, “you have absolutely reached a point where the audience can no longer follow, at least not in a healthy way.”

But wait. Wasn't Mr. Fischl part of the generation of artists that won that battle in the late 1970s and early 1980s, bringing painting and figurative art back in one triumphant stroke?

The show at the Parrish, “All the More Real: Portrayals of Intimacy and Empathy,” stems from discussions between Mr. Fischl and Ms. Falkenberg, who met when Mr. Fischl saw a film at the museum about the strategies artists use to elicit responses from viewers. With Mr. Fischl's ruminations on the death of painting and Ms. Falkenberg's catalog essay, which considers what she calls the “tentative emergence” of realism, “All the More Real” has the makings of a rather conservative, backward-looking show.

Yet on the walls and in the galleries, it doesn't necessarily feel that way.

The show skims over the last century, plucking figurative works from different decades and installing them in a slightly disjointed fashion. At the entrance, scale is the issue. Tom Friedman's tiny self-portrait head carved from an aspirin tablet is hung near Jeff Hesser's larger-than-life-size “Baby Face,” a paunchy beeswax head that conflates bloated middle age with infant blubber.

In the next section objects are arranged to mirror the human life cycle. Newborns are cast in dirt by James Croak, painted in sickly watercolors by [Egon Schiele](#) and perched on a mother's belly in Ron Mueck's hyperrealist fiberglass and silicone sculpture. Loretta Lux's ubiquitous photographs of unsmiling, alien-looking children are followed by Tim Gardner's pastel copies of his 9th- and 10th-grade school photographs. Old age arrives in Tierney Gearon's C-prints, which pair members of her family from different generations.

Then the show shifts gears. The next grouping considers the body as a site of anxiety, neuroses and disease, hallmarks of 1980s and 1990s art that responded to AIDS (and to theorists like Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva).

Louise Bourgeois, whose work often makes frank reference to her family, offers a grimacing fabric-covered head with the gut-twisting title "We Love You." Cancer cells become delicate, decorative pointillism in Ross Bleckner's canvas. Doughnuts oozing purple-crimson jelly conjure human orifices in Emily Eveleth's paintings, and melons look like removed organs in Joan Goldin's iris print.

Mr. Fischl hasn't included any of his own paintings, but you see reflections of his work everywhere, most obviously in a freestanding wall of figurative oil paintings of nude women by Cynthia Westwood, Joan Semmel and Lucian Freud. Here brushstrokes, scale and different vantage points are deployed to connect the psychology of the sitter, the artist and the viewer. Other works that feel pertinent to Mr. Fischl's oeuvre include Alice Neel's painting of a wary-looking "Pregnant Betty Homitsky" and [Chuck Close](#)'s portrait of his wife built up from his thumbprints, which offers a new take on the artist's "touch."

You can also see Mr. Fischl's interest in the psychological impact of the image in works by contemporaries like Cindy Sherman and Robert Gober, as well as younger artists like Karel Funk, who paints his subjects from oblique angles or seen from behind.

In its thinking about artistic strategies, rather than where painting and figurative art stand in the current art hierarchy, the show gets interesting. How do you make art "more real" than the objects — in this case, people — it represents? Or, to make things simpler, how do you pull viewers out of the rut of expectation?

Figurative artists have always borrowed and reconfigured what was before them, and imagined how their ancestors would have disapproved. The Greeks probably wouldn't have liked the Romans' portraits, in which heads were severed from the rest of the body. Some have argued that Michelangelo would be appalled with contemporary art's focus on the abject, psychological and uncanny aspects of the body. (Though Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" in the Sistine Chapel, with its steroidal figures and self-portrait painted on a flayed martyr's skin, isn't exactly for the faint of

stomach.)

“All the More Real” feels at times like a master class led by Mr. Fischl, although a somewhat anachronistic one. Painting is hardly dead. And humans will undoubtedly be making images of themselves, in some medium, as long as they make art. Walk around Chelsea today and you’ll see no dearth of figurative painting. You also might discover young abstract painters who claim that they are in the minority and that the art of the last 15 years has shunned abstraction, banishing it to the sidelines.

In this sense, perhaps the best way to view this show is as an assisted portrait of the artist, seen through his own eyes rather than painted by his hand.

“All the More Real: Portrayals of Intimacy and Empathy” continues through Oct. 14 at the Parrish Art Museum, 25 Job’s Lane, Southampton, N.Y.; (631) 283-2118, parrishart.org.

| | _____ | | _____ | | _____ | | _____ | | _____ | | _____ | | _____
