



UNCANNY/FIGURE

HOLLY COULIS, JENNY DUBNAU, ANGELA DUFRESNE, DAVID FERTIG,
DENNIS KARDON, ELIZABETH KING, ELIZABETH KING & RICHARD KIZU-BLAIR,
MATTHEW MILLER, SARAH PETERS, RONA PONDICK, AND ALEXI WORTH

Curated by Lilly Wei

September 20 – December 13, 2015

Opening reception: Sunday, September 20, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

The artists in this multigenerational exhibition of paintings, sculpture, works on paper and video, from 1984 to just off the drawing board, have consciously, conspicuously chosen to engage with the figure, each in his or her idiosyncratic way. Figuration has, of course, a venerable and unbroken history that stretches back millennia, although modernism with its abstract formulations and conceptual imperatives sent it toppling from its long held position at the top of the art hierarchy. But many artists were not persuaded, stubbornly clinging to the body as the most compelling, most redemptive emblem of our flawed, perverse and, at times, heroic humanity. And when representation triumphantly returned in the 1980s, so did the figure, backed up by new discourses. One reason for the renewed interest in figuration might be that in an age of the increasingly virtual, it reaffirms the importance of our bodies, reminding us that we are more than incorporeal mind. As everyone from the Greeks to today's neurologists knows, one depends upon the other.

Artists practicing today such as those in *Uncanny/Figure*—seven of whom are primarily painters, the other three, primarily sculptors—believe that a visual lexicon dedicated to the figure and descriptive representation can still be exciting and innovative. It can reflect the present since, like any language, it is renewable, adaptable, and capable of expansion. These artists are aware of the history of art, the history of painting and sculpture, as well as new disciplines and contemporary issues. Working in their chosen language, they are not nostalgic; moving forward, they constitute a significant segment of the present's richly diverse cultural practices, one that does

not require justification.

What seems more topical is the idea of the “uncanny” which informs the other half of the exhibition's theme. The uncanny also has a long history, as periods of enlightened, measured rationality alternate with periods of the surreal, the supernatural, the grotesque and the sublime. It is a word that appears with great frequency of late, reflecting an anxiety that is global, mirroring realities that ricochet through all levels of our lives, from the social and political to the personal and psychological.

Not only figurative but almost all portraits, the works on view are intensely, enthrallingly peculiar, creating a cognitive dissonance, a nuanced uneasiness through a combination of the familiar and the strange. Some are more overtly weird than others. Jenny Dubnau and Sarah Peters, both artists in the show and responsible for its naissance, are fascinated by the aesthetics of the uncanny. They regard such art as something that is “jarring,” characterized by “formal wrongness” and “narrative oddities.” Dramatic, emotionally fraught, dark and darkly humorous, they and the other participants imaginatively and perceptively muse on what it is to be us, with our messes and our mortality, housed in a motley array of incongruous, vulnerable bodies and equally vulnerable psyches.

The sculptors are perhaps the most immediately disquieting. **Sarah Peters's** bronze heads gaze relentlessly ahead, sucking our gaze into the disproportionately large voids where the eyes should be, oracular presences lost in existential thought. Not quite life-sized, they offer an extremely compressed history of sculpture, from Mesopotamia to modernism and the contemporary. Two are from her *Descendants and Believers* series (2010), with the haunting look of temple figures from Uruk and Tell Asmar. But it is the regal, refined *Portrait of a Bearded Man* (2014) that is a tour de force. The head arches back in a partial C-shape, hair and beard—which cunningly



Sarah Peters *Portrait of a Bearded Man*, 2014



Rona Pondick *Mouse*, 2002-2006



Jenny Dubnau *Self-Portrait, Shrugging, 2014*

form the pedestal—finely articulated. The undulant column, inscribed with registers of countless, tiny commas alternating directions, becomes an imperious, magnificent beard that would make an Akkadian king (or a Williamsburg *philosophe*) proud.

Elizabeth King, on the other hand, creates startling creatures that are self-portraits of sorts. Always half life-sized and derived from her family history, they are expertly, meticulously crafted. Deeply interested in clockwork automata, puppets and mannequins, King's sculptures, composed of wood and a variety of other materials such as glass eyes, eyelashes, porcelain, metal, fiber optics, are inspired in part by Bunraku, the traditional puppet theater of Japan, and by puppets and toys that magically come alive in folktales and myths. Some, such as the intricate *Articulated Torso* (1984-86), are shown as sculpture and others are featured in stop-frame animations, such as *What Happened* (1991). In the animation, a macabrely lovely skeleton examines itself pensively, poignantly, flexing its movable parts (note the the grace of its moving hands, the hand a recurrent—and unexpected—motif in *Uncanny/Figure*). It is mesmerizing. King succeeds in making her figures come alive (like Geppetto and Pinocchio), or at least blurs the divide between the sentient and non-sentient. It is a tension between the artificial and the real, the repellent and the bewitching that rests at the core of her work's eerie allure.

A master of the hybridized and the surreal, **Rona Pondick** conjures her own figures of absorbing weirdness. For more than fifteen years, she has been cultivating a troupe of chimerical creatures, created by grafting a life cast of her head and hands made of matte stainless steel onto the brilliantly polished stainless steel bodies of schematized animals. Unforgettable and disturbingly Kafkaesque, with a nod to the Egyptians (among other influences), they are potent metaphors for the interchangeability of the human and the bestial in our natures. *Dog* (1998-2001), seated on its haunches, and *Mouse* (2002-2006), the head tilted, reclining, a tail



Angela Dufresne *Ava Gardner, from Night of the Iguana, by John Ford, 2015*

slithering out, are bizarrely, improbably beautiful. Like the sculptures of Peters and King, that unholy beauty is the consequence of formal resolutions that cast a spell over the work, redefining and redeeming its content.

Many of the painters are also portraitists. **Jenny Dubnau** seems the most straight-up, straight-forward, her striking, closely scrutinized images derived in part from photographs, the hand-made collaborating with the mechanically or digitally reproduced. But she is no photorealist, and her desire to produce a likeness digs deeper than mere superficial replication. Balanced between a documentary impulse and the materiality of the paint, she purposefully manipulates both to produce integrated, psychologically charged studies of her



Holly Coulis *Man, Lamp, Circles, 2015*

subjects. For instance, *Self-Portrait, Shrugging* (2014) and *S.D. with Bright Eyes* (2015), are similarly posed, heads tilted slightly back, gaze straight ahead, unflinching, challenging, thinking, judging. Discomfiting at first, even unappealing, they suggest mug shots with no attempt to flatter. But quickly enough, you are captivated by the lushness of the brushwork, the sheen of the oil paint, and the subtlety of the colors that inflect the surface. The field is as richly painted as the image, a discord that results in a more complex, more difficult and charismatic picture, which was, no doubt, what Dubnau was after all along.

Angela Dufresne goes further in pushing the paint/figure dichotomy, her brushwork loosely cast about her images. Applying strokes with gusto and the appearance of nonchalance—slips and slides of color, a smear of pink that curves into a cheek, a swipe of red dabbed with pink for sexy lips—her three portraits are all based on images from films: two from *Louise Smith, from Working Girls*, by *Lizzie Borden* (2015) and *Ava Gardner, from Night of the Iguana*, by *John Ford* (2015). Modest in size, these paintings also give equivalent weight to foreground and background, the entire surface activated, as if about to shift, dissolve, as it could if it were film, the women seemingly on the verge of melting away, underscoring their unstable, emotional state. The sense of incipient movement that comes from the verve of the gestures and the illusionism of paint creates curious parallels between still and moving media.

Holly Coulis has a more graphic sensibility, although the painterly is also present, offering matter-of-factly and seamlessly two orders of representation in her newest works, soliciting two responses to her bisected fictive world. In *Man, Lamp, Circles* (2015), one world is geometric, dividing the interior into discontinuous sections furnished with a schematized lamp, a partial ellipse, a drawing of a shirt. The person who wears it is more life-like—a black-haired, black-browed, red-lipped Latino man, posed in classic three-quarter view, sandwiched between the lamp and the ellipse. A kind of still life, as the artist calls them, the whole is enigmatic, curiously retro, but a retro that paradoxically appears futuristic, as envisioned from a 50s perspective, the human caught between the abstracted and the illustrated. Oddly, there is realistic depiction of a human hand at the painting's lower left edge, but whether of the protagonist, the



Alexi Worth *Smoker and Mirror*, 2012

artist or even someone else is uncertain. However, it reminds us that the painting is handmade and what is portrayed is an invention that teases us with the clarity of its execution and the ambiguity of its meaning.

The most abstract, the most economically rendered of the works are the recently completed “busts” of **Matthew Miller**. His very delicately modulated, very evocative



Dennis Kardon *My Love*, 1996



Matthew Miller *Bust Drawing*, 2015

series of pencil drawings of upright blocks of wood are shadowed by a darkly ominous shape that suggests a face, much as cracks and stains on half-lighted walls and ceiling once spurred our childish imagination and terrified us. They turned the mundane wood blocks into alien, more numinous semblances such as the giant heads of Easter Island and other totems of mysterious origins and power, touching lightly on the primeval, the atavistic, and the metamorphic. They might also be apparitions or veiled women. Four are shown here, each slightly different, each reading of them fluid, dependent more on the observer than on their physical composition. A block of wood is a block of wood until animated and transformed by the potential for sorcery of human perceptual capabilities.

The remaining three artists

stage their works, their figures given a setting, a context. **Dennis Kardon** is the most naturalistic and also the most socially outrageous of the three, his sensibility somewhere between Philip Roth's and a fratboy's, represented by two extravagantly painted domestic scenes from the late 1990s. Often biographical, *My Love* (1996) shows the artist holding his naked child, his hand (hands again) gripping its bare bottom, a gesture that is no longer considered innocent, however innocent it might be, the room subtly warped by a number of un-reconciled perspectives, creating an atmosphere of unease. Other oddities include the fact that he is in his underwear, his glance startled, looking outward, a Velázquez-like figure of a woman reflected in the mirror behind him. Is he looking at her? At us? Is she approving, disapproving? How do we feel? There is tension in both form and content, as Kardon, like the great Spanish Baroque painter, makes us think about the fictive and the real, underscoring the fact that it is a painting. *Nature Boy* (1999), a tightly framed composition of a boy holding a pillow, his fingers sticky with his ejaculate distract us by its narrative, but it is the range of warm flesh tones, the wonderful russet of his thick hair, the tender violet of the pillow that steals the show, disarming us, our attention redirected.

Alexi Worth's relatively recent work, *Tennessee* (2013) pictures a nude on a raft floating on sketchy waters (the pose reminiscent of Mantegna's foreshortened *Dead Christ*



David Fertig *Komm Her*, 2015

from c.1480), the body impossibly elongated. The other in the show is *Smoker and Mirror* (2012), both painted on nylon mesh. While figurative, they have moved even farther away from naturalistic human form, the mesh adding an additional scrim between image and viewer, image and reality, in much the way a frame does. *Smoker and Mirror*, while literally descriptive (the smoker represented by, yes, another hand, this one holding a cigarette, the rest of him outside the picture plane), inevitably also refers to smoke and mirrors as a figure of speech, that is, to deception. A smoker is one who produces smoke, obscuring the truth, while a mirror reflects what is before it, reversed, but can also be manipulated so it, too, is ultimately untrustworthy. Both are about illusion, which is the mainstay of the artist and his or her bag of tricks and for which he or she, as the ultimate

conjurer of the uncanny, is much sought after.

David Fertig produces hundreds upon hundreds of oil paintings, his studio brimming with his work and with reproductions torn from books and catalogues. Characterized by lively, tactile surfaces, his brushwork is also luxuriant, his application of paint fresh, immediate, supple. Deeply interested in 18th century history, his style is influenced by European Romanticism, Abstract Expressionism and contemporary painting, both abstract and figurative. But his paintings also suggest images familiar from films, photographs, and television dramas. In *Komm Her* (2015), one of his paintings shown here (the other is *1802*, also from 2015), he contrasts the recessive, out-of-focus face of an officer with his assertive, upraised, white-gloved hand in the foreground, the glove nubby and coarse. A finger forcefully beckons. It seems to be an independent entity, extending out into real space, becoming the focal point of the picture, one key to the show.

Uncanny/Figure is ultimately a looking glass world, in which the real is mirrored and returned to us with distortions, or the distortions are returned to us as real, where nothing is quite fixed or what we expected. Its artists take our familiar world and propose another one in its place, spun through their savvy, wayward minds, unruly figuration in tow—with their agile hands as executor—to tell us tales about the human condition. ■

— Lilly Wei
New York, NY, 2015

BIOGRAPHY

Lilly Wei is a New York-based independent curator and critic whose focus is contemporary art. She has written regularly for *Art in America* since 1984 and is a contributing editor at *ARTnews* and formerly a contributing editor at *Art Asia Pacific*. Wei has also written for many other national and international publications and frequently reports on biennials and other large international exhibitions. Wei is the author of numerous monographs, exhibition catalogues and brochures on contemporary artists, and has curated exhibitions in the United States, Europe and Asia. Wei lectures on critical and curatorial practices and serves on various advisory committees and review panels. Additionally, she sits on the board of several not-for-profit art institutions and organizations. Wei was born in Chengdu, China and has an MA in art history from Columbia University, New York.

CHECKLIST

HOLLY COULIS

MAN, LAMP, CIRCLES, 2015
Oil on linen
17 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Cherry and Martin

GLASS VASES AND FACE,
2015
Oil on linen
17 x 21 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Cherry and Martin

JENNY DUBNAU

S.D. WITH BRIGHT EYES,
2015
Oil on canvas
46 x 56 inches
Courtesy of the artist

SELF-PORTRAIT, SHRUG-
GING, 2014
Oil on canvas
42 x 36 inches
Courtesy of the artist

ANGELA DUFRESNE

LOUISE SMITH, FROM
WORKING GIRLS, BY LIZZIE
BORDEN, 1, 2015
Oil on canvas
12 x 16 inches
Courtesy of the artist

LOUISE SMITH, FROM
WORKING GIRLS, BY LIZZIE
BORDEN, 2, 2015
Oil on canvas
12 x 16 inches
Courtesy of the artist

AVA GARDNER FROM NIGHT
OF THE IGUANA, BY JOHN
FORD, 2015
Oil on canvas
12 x 16 inches
Courtesy of the artist

DAVID FERTIG

KOMM HER, 2015
Oil on panel
9 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the artist

1802, 2015
Oil on panel
11 ½ x 8 inches
Courtesy of the artist

DENNIS KARDON

NATURE BOY, 1999
Oil on linen
52 x 48 inches
Courtesy of the artist

MY LOVE, 1996
Oil on linen
76 x 60 inches
Courtesy of the artist

ELIZABETH KING

ARTICULATED TORSO,
1984-86
Bronze
8 x 6 x 4 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
DANESE/COREY, New York

ELIZABETH KING & RICHARD KIZU-BLAIR

WHAT HAPPENED, 1991
Remastered for high definition
video 2008
Silent stop-frame animation,
2 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and
DANESE/COREY, New York

MATTHEW MILLER

BUST DRAWING, 2015
Graphite on paper
24 x 19 inches
Courtesy of the artist

BUST DRAWING, 2015
Graphite on paper
24 x 19 inches
Courtesy of the artist

BUST DRAWING, 2015
Graphite on paper
24 x 19 inches
Courtesy of the artist

BUST DRAWING, 2015
Graphite on paper
24 x 19 inches
Courtesy of the artist

SARAH PETERS

DESCENDANTS AND
BELIEVERS #4, 2010
Bronze
11 ½ x 7 ½ x 9 inches
Courtesy of the artist

DESCENDANTS AND
BELIEVERS #3, 2010
Bronze
15 x 8 ½ x 9 inches
Courtesy of the artist

PORTRAIT OF A BEARDED
MAN, 2014
Bronze
8 x 9 x 14
Courtesy of the artist

RONA PONDICK

DOG, 1998-2001
Yellow stainless steel
28 x 16 ½ x 32 inches
Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus
Ropac, Paris/Salzburg,
Sonnabend Gallery, New York
and the artist

MOUSE, 2002-2006
Stainless steel
6 ½ x 9 ½ x 17 inches
Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus
Ropac, Paris/Salzburg,
Sonnabend Gallery, New York
and the artist

ALEXI WORTH

SMOKER AND MIRROR, 2012
Acrylic on nylon mesh
36 x 27 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
DC Moore Gallery, New York

TENNESSEE, 2013
Acrylic on nylon mesh
42 x 56 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
DC Moore Gallery, New York

Cover: Elizabeth King & Richard Kizu-Blair, *What Happened (video still)*, 1991

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