

A Look Back to ‘Circa 1995,’ When ‘New Figuration’ Was the Latest Signal of Painting’s Rebirth

Nothing is ever as pretty as it seems.



Installation view, 'Circa 1995: New Figuration in New York,' at David Zwirner, New York. Courtesy David Zwirner



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‘Circa 1995: New Figuration in New York’

David Zwirner Gallery, 537 West 20th Street, Manhattan

Through July 17

The “death” and “rebirth” of painting is a perennial occurrence that nonetheless roils the art world every time it happens. According to David Zwirner’s new show, the last important resurgence of painting, figuration in particular, occurred in 1995.

Featuring John Currin, Peter Doig, Marlene Dumas, Chris Ofili, Laura Owens,

Elizabeth Peyton, Luc Tuymans, and Lisa Yuskavage, this show gives us an idea of how painting made a return that has lasted with minor abatements until the present.

Where had it gone before? The early '90s, a heyday of everything “Post Modern,” was a time of extreme enthusiasm for photography, video art, installation, and performance. Representation was “suspect,” political sensitivity to depictions of the figure and the male gaze were especially prickly, and the whole enterprise was being routinely sniffed at as “anachronistic.” Once considered the bleeding edge of a vanguard, with some controversies and record auctions to boot, this group of figurative superstars make interesting viewing some 30 years later.

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Feature, say, Mr. Currin, whose mannerist portrayals of women lean into discomfort and parody. “The Bra Shop” reads almost as farce, its two college-aged women sporting ludicrously enormous breasts while consulting in the manner of '70s pin-up girls. “Cripple,” once again featuring a beaming “girl-next-door” with mannerist proportions, adds a cane, a sinister allusion to disfigurement. Mr. Currin excels at taking vulgar American tropes and blending them with assured classical technique, a one-two feint that leaves us forever on the back foot. Nothing is ever as pretty as it seems.

Ms. Peyton, on the other hand, revels in prettiness. Her deceptively casual paintings of men seem half-lifted from Renaissance frescos, half from Guess jeans ads. It is a tension that, like with Mr. Currin, pits the classical against the utterly contemporary. Her works here play on the culture of fame, such as a blurry rendering of Kurt Cobain

in profile, “Kurt,” or her friend “Martin.” Both have a casually framed intimacy suggesting back-room celebrity encounters. In her work male beauty is both fragile and legendary, the stuff of both myth and fleeting moments.

Ms. Yuskavage offers an interesting mid-point between Mr. Currin and Ms. Peyton in that she neither backs away from crass stereotypes nor from saccharine prettiness. She almost paints from the perspective of a Midwestern tween, half young adult fiction novel, half adolescent reverie. Her young women are also deformed to the point of caricature, like Mr. Currin’s, but she also respects their interiority. Her figures emerge soft and shadowy from glazed and monochromatic surfaces, troubled with seductive worry. “Faucet” has a young woman emerging from a peach-colored wall, her face half wary, half confrontational. Are we gazing at her or are we being summoned? Ms. Yuskavage leaves it vague, which is part of its power.

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Ms. Dumas and Mr. Tuymans supply two paintings that explore the return of figuration as a restrained medium. In “The Visitor,” we see her psychological adeptness, where a group of women appear to be waiting for someone to emerge from a bright yellow doorway. Mr. Tuymans is so understated as to escape notice. Only when you look again do you notice the economy and precision that inhabits each work. Like Dumas, he addresses memory and tension. “The Heritage VI” appears to be a painting of an old family snapshot. You are not looking at a person, it seems, but at the passing of time.

Mr. Ofili scandalized the art world in 1996 with his painting of the Virgin Mary that contained pieces of elephant dung. An incensed Mayor Giuliani thought it sacrilegious, though Mr. Ofili explained it was an invocation of fertility and “earthiness.” His signature work here, “Afrodisia,” is a glittery, psychedelic fantasy that is more paean than parody. Small, teardrop-shaped photographs of black notables fan out like stars or planets while delicate squiggles join them, all over a diffuse and hazy rainbow background. It suggests an alternate universe of cultural and social affinities at which we can only guess. His signature lumps of elephant dung are also here, laminated, as it turns out. The effect is whimsical and funky, not polemical.

Ms. Owens offers two paintings, an interior and a landscape, that seem to compress the carefully wrought clumsiness of Phillip Guston together with the palette of Yoshitomo Nara. They are spare and enigmatic, inhabiting a new imaginative space of painting that like Ms. Yuskavage’s hearkens back to an almost simplistic naiveté. It’s not hard, however, to enter them visually and psychologically, meaning once again that painting is deployed to create a new sense of space and inhabitation.

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The standout of the show, however, has to be Mr. Doig. His now famous painting of the restored Corbusier apartment seen through a stand of trees, “Briey (Concrete Cabin),” establishes his ability to convey a deep sense of the personal through landscape. Not since Edvard Munch has landscape had such a swirling, dappled, mesmerizing punch. The same atmospheric grip permeates “jetty,” his view of a lone

figure on a pier going out to a lakeside that then ascends to dazzling, sun dappled ecstasy.

Much more remains to be said about this singular collection of work by artists so idiosyncratic and relevant. All continue to have a strong presence in today's art world. Yet this jam-packed and cryptic show might lend some clues about what shifted in 1995, and brought about painting's return.