



Whitechapel Gallery Radical Figures

Painting in the New Millennium
6 February – 30 August 2020

#RadicalFigures

Introduction

Radical Figures features works by ten artists who represent the body in experimental and expressive ways to tell compelling stories and explore vital social concerns. Largely avoiding the conventions of realism and portraiture, they breathe new life into figurative painting and explore timely subjects, including gender and sexuality, society and politics, race and body image.

Representational painting has been unfashionable and superseded by photography and video since the critical backlash against 1980s Neo-Expressionism. As a seemingly outmoded medium in a digital era, painting finds itself at a complex juncture, particularly when it comes to representing bodies. The slow process of painting the figure is at odds with our instantaneous culture of taking, editing and sharing images. Rather than the illusion of perfection perpetuated by social media, painting can expand and destabilise fixed notions of identity by fragmenting, exaggerating and morphing the figure.

While the participating artists turn to art historical subjects – such as seascapes and nudes– they also draw on children’s books, comics, popular music, news stories and pornography as sources of imagery and inspiration. Painting is highly subjective, and the accretion of tactile layers of pigment, form and reference, creates bodies and narratives that are open to ambiguity, impurity and, ultimately, to invention.

Cecily Brown

After studying painting at the Slade School of Art in the early 1990s, Cecily Brown (b. 1969, London) left London, where painting had fallen out of favour among her generation, and settled in New York. Hovering between representation and a type of abstraction associated with the 1950s New York action painters, Brown's canvases blend bold brushwork, human figures, animals and elements from the landscape or setting. *Maid's Day Off* (2005) is an elaborate *mise-en-scène*, a bourgeois interior brimming with evidence of disarray and debauchery straight out of William Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* (1732–34). The imagery is difficult to discern and the title adds to the ambiguity. Has the maid been party to the goings-on or did they happen in her absence?

Recent paintings by Brown take the sea as a point of departure. Her palette in *Lucky Beach* (2017) is inspired by the unique northern light she experienced on the coast in Denmark. *Oinops* (2016–17) and *The Last Shipwreck* (2018) are based on paintings of maritime disasters by 19th-century French painters Eugène Delacroix and Théodore Géricault. Turning to art history has been a way for Brown to address the sea and the beach as highly contested sites today, where issues of national identity, ethnicity, gender and religious beliefs intersect.

Daniel Richter

Daniel Richter (b. 1962, Eutin, Germany) was active in leftist politics and designed posters for demonstrations and punk bands prior to studying painting in the early 1990s at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg. There, he came into contact with Neo-Expressionist painters, among them his tutor Werner Büttner and Albert Oehlen, who employed him as a studio assistant. Richter's activism is reflected in both his choice of subjects and painting methods. *Tarifa* (2001) is based on a news image of migrants attempting to make the dangerous sea crossing from North Africa to the Spanish town of Tarifa in a rubber dinghy. The figures are painted with glowing patches of colour, as if seen through night vision and thermal imaging cameras used by the military and emergency services.

In "*HEY JOE*" (2011), a Taliban fighter shares a cigarette with a cowboy in a psychedelic mountainscape. Taking its title from a Jimi Hendrix song, the painting relates a story of male violence. Troubled masculinity is also explored in the fluorescent and hallucinatory *Das erstaunliche Comeback des Dr. Freud* [The Amazing Comeback of Dr Freud] (2004). Finally, it is both admired and critiqued in *Asger, Bill und Mark* (2015), a work based on internet pornography and titled after famous male painters Asger Jorn, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko.

Sanya Kantarovsky

Sanya Kantarovsky (b. 1982, Russia) spent his early childhood in Moscow during the final years of the Soviet Union, moving to the US at the age of ten. Kantarovsky often draws on his memories of this time to create darkly humorous paintings, showing figures in caring, violent or uncomfortable relationships that don't always invite sympathy: 'The figures in my paintings are often steeped in a sort of acute embarrassment and, in the best examples, the embarrassment doesn't spare any onlookers, myself included.'

To create his cast of imaginary characters, he draws on sources as various as comic book illustrations, Russian poster designs and references found in literature and art history. In *Letdown* (2017), Kantarovsky subverts the Christian religious tradition of Madonna and Child paintings. Kantarovsky's version plays on the double meaning of the word 'letdown', which is also a term for the process of releasing milk during breastfeeding. Reproductive biology is also referenced in *Друзь* [Friend] (2018), where an eel-like character bears a wide-eyed smile next to a warped egg. The Pierrot-like character in *Feeder* (2016) spoons a green liquid that looks anything but nourishing. Likewise, in *Deprivation* (2018), a seemingly caring relationship between a male figure and a reclining woman is belied by the title and the tight grip of a hand.

Tala Madani

Tala Madani (b. 1981, Tehran) creates paintings that often feature groups of hapless, balding middle-aged men. She became aware of social segregation between men and women as a child in Iran before moving to the US as a teenager. Using a comic style and fluid brushwork, Madani paints grotesquely funny scenes that obliquely criticise masculine authority. In *Dirty Stars* (2008), three figures expose their backsides to a man who gives a lesson. *Sitting in White* (2008) portrays the purer activity of group prayer, undercut by Madani's rendering of the men's beards to look like broad smiles. *Campfire* (2011) shows a very different scene of ritual. Three men tend a fire to cook their cannibal meal in pear-shaped jars. The simple figures and stark shadows evidence Madani's interest in film and animation. In *Light Balance* (2012) the projection of light and shadow becomes a theme, as the stacked column of men in underwear point torches alternately at faces and genitals.

Shit Mom (Deluxe) (2019) is part of a recent body of work in which Madani explores the judgement and expectations placed on artists who are mothers: 'I took the figure of the mother and rendered her from excrement with children surrounding her, feeding or eating her up. I wouldn't have made this series if I hadn't become a mother myself, and the work plays on an idea of the anti-heroic mother.'

Michael Armitage

Paintings by London-based artist Michael Armitage (b.1984, Nairobi) feature subjects from East African folklore, popular culture and news stories. Evoking the style and palette of the French Post-Impressionist Paul Gauguin and the Norwegian proto-Expressionist Edvard Munch, Armitage builds up layers of oil paint on a coarse canvas of Ugandan lubugo bark cloth, which has traditionally been used for burial shrouds and ceremonial garments.

Armitage's work explores gender, sexuality and politics in East Africa. In *Kampala Suburb* (2014), two men share an intimate kiss under a frieze with scenes of firing squads, evoking Francisco de Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (1814) and Edouard Manet's series *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* (1867–69). The painting is a response to the Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2014, which had initially prescribed the death penalty for 'offences of homosexuality'. *#mydressmychoice* (2015) – featuring a reclining nude based on Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647–51) – is titled after the social media hashtag used to protest an attack on a woman in Nairobi who was stripped and assaulted by a group of men for wearing a miniskirt. The deceptively dreamlike *Mangroves Dip* (2015) refers to European female sex tourism in Kenya. The intertwined snakes in *Peace Coma* (2012) serve as a warning that dissent should not be silenced in the name of 'peace'.

In the Studio

How do painters use materials, sources and techniques to communicate ideas? This room features items from the studios of each artist.

In a short film, **Michael Armitage** explains how he works with lubugo, an East African bark cloth traditionally used for making burial shrouds. Fabric swatches and fragments from the studio of **Tschabalala Self** attest to her interest in the handicrafts of quilting and appliqué.

Having once worked as a guard at The National Gallery, **Ryan Mosley** keeps museum postcards and other sources of inspiration pinned to his studio wall. **Cecily Brown** is also interested in historic paintings, such as *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19) by Géricault, which records a notorious shipwreck. **Daniel Richter** turns to books and music when sketching initial ideas for his paintings. **Sanya Kantarovsky** has a more oblique range of sources, including an etching, a cut-out cartoon character and a piece of volcanic rock.

Christina Quarles uses laser-cut stencils to create sharply defined edges. She outlines figures in felt-tip pen alongside song lyrics, which become titles. **Nicole Eisenman** makes use of the malleable qualities of oil paint to create dynamic crowd scenes and portraits. **Dana Schutz** maps out compositions with thumbnail drawings, while **Tala Madani** explores ideas in a sketchbook.

Nicole Eisenman

Nicole Eisenman (b. 1965, Verdun, France) studied at Rhode Island School of Design (1987) and spent a year in Rome enthralled by Renaissance painting. She uses allegory and satire to engage with contemporary social subjects, including gender and sexuality, the inequalities of wealth and power and the tropes of Western figurative painting. Observing everyday human behaviour, Eisenman moves across genres and subjects, from large groups of figures in busy compositions, to couples in domestic scenes and expressionist portraits. 'Applying paint' for Eisenman, 'is like any language; communication in life varies, we talk in colloquialisms, we talk formally, we talk and act appropriately or inappropriately.'

Progress: Real and Imagined (2006) is an allegorical history painting. The left panel of the mural-like diptych focuses on the monumental figure of an artist working in a studio onboard a boat on a rocky sea. The second panel shifts in scale and depicts a creation story or apocalypse unfolding in an Arctic landscape surrounded by an inky black sea and peopled by figures engaged in hunting and fishing, birth and death. The figures are rendered in great detail, reminiscent of paintings by Hieronymus Bosch or Pieter Brueghel. *Brooklyn Biergarten II* (2008) is part of a group of works representing the artist's social milieu, while *Sleeper* (2016) depicts the state of consciousness that fuels the imagination and creativity.

Dana Schutz

Dana Schutz (b. 1976, Livonia, Michigan) has been working in New York City since studying at Columbia University in the early 2000s. Her paintings feature grotesque figures engaged in absurd, humorous and sometimes abject activities. Referencing early 20th-century art, including German Expressionism and Cubism, Schutz often works in thick impasto and fragments and distorts elements of the human body. For a series of early paintings, she began by imagining a body eating itself. Goya's *Saturn* (1820–23), in which the god devours his own son, offered one art historical precedent. Two early paintings embody the creative process. *Man Eating His Chest* (2005) presents a figure gorging himself on his own torso, while in *New Legs* (2003), an androgynous artist either sculpts new appendages or makes a sculpture from her own body parts. 'I thought they could be abstract paintings', Schutz muses, 'because they were so self-involved, very structural.'

Reminiscent of the paintings of both Marsden Hartley and Max Beckmann, *Imagine You and Me* (2018) features a couple adrift at sea with only birds, plants and fish for company. A motley cast of characters in prison uniforms take shade under a red and white sun umbrella surrounded by fish bones picked clean of all flesh in *Suspicious Minds* (2019). Her use of the striped motif is perhaps a reference to abstract painting.

Ryan Mosley

While studying at the Royal College of Art in London, Ryan Mosley (b. 1980, Chesterfield, UK) worked as a guard at the National Gallery, absorbing pictorial motifs and strategies from old masters and early modern painters such as Titian, Jean-Antoine Watteau and Edgar Degas. The flattened perspectival space of pre-Renaissance paintings and the experience of seeing pictures over the heads of gallery visitors influenced the shallow depth of field and stage-like framing in Mosley's work.

In *Cave Inn* (2011), the audience watches a couple dancing in lock step across a stage, creating an optical illusion with the negative space reading as a skull, delineated by the dark silhouettes of parasols, botanical elements and bearded figures. *Wearing Another's Head on Your Jacket* (2014) is a double portrait: a figure seen in profile wears a coat that is decorated with another face. *Duchess of Oils* (2014) grew out of an idea of painting an actor who simultaneously manifests all the roles he or she has ever performed. The sexually ambiguous figure of the duchess has grown several additional faces, with different eyes, noses, lips and facial hair. *In Teaching Snakes to be Snakes* (2008), limbs, heads, torso and snakes emerge from and merge with each other. Mosley is 'interested in these failed attempts because they suddenly offer the possibility of constructing figures through a kind of broken anatomy.'

Christina Quarles

The paintings of Christina Quarles (b. 1985, Chicago) feature entwined nude figures within flat abstracted environments. She draws on her background as a graphic designer to develop her compositions and creates some elements with computer software such as Adobe Illustrator. Quarles explores female, black and queer identity through the active agency of these contorted bodies pressing against the confines of the canvas and reflecting her experience of feeling fragmented in her own body. In *For Whom Tha Sunsets Free* (2019) bodies are enmeshed in a close embrace of limbs, torsos and heads. The lines drawn between one body and another are ambiguous and paint or bodily fluids drip from the figures.

The three figures in *Casually Cruel* (2018) are contained by a tall hedge, with one entrapped in such a way that only certain body parts reach through the green wall. While making this work, Quarles was listening to news reports of migrant families separated at the US-Mexico border and imagining their fear and isolation. She uses slang, everyday expressions and music lyrics in her titles, playing with double meanings and punning. In paintings such as *Sun Bleached* (2018), she describes this layering process as 'looking for patterns that have... a sort of visual punning and multiple locations, like a field of flowers that's a pattern on a bedspread or a field of flowers in nature'.

Tschabalala Self

Tschabalala Self (b. 1990, New York) studied printmaking and painting at Bard College and Yale School of Art. Self depicts black figures, often female, in a bold, exaggerated and flattened style with a combination of sewn, printed, and painted materials. She learned quilt making and sewing from maternal family members and uses these assemblage and appliqué techniques to confront the stereotypical and sexualized representation of black bodies, referencing Jacob Lawrence and Faith Ringgold as artistic touchstones. Working with fabric scraps, she prefers ‘materials that are of the world because they keep that energy from their original purpose’.

Koco at the Bodega (2017) is part of a group of works celebrating local bodegas, convenience stores that are a gathering place in black and Latino communities in an ever gentrifying New York City. *NYPD* (2019) and *Lenox* (2019) embody what the artist calls ‘avatars’ of black American experience and identity; the brickwork-patterned fabric stitches them to the urban environment of Harlem where she grew up. Extending her practice beyond the canvas, an oversized pair of female legs painted on the wall overshadows the smaller figure in the canvas. *Fade* (2019) is titled after the hairstyle sported by the male figure. In a further exaggeration of both feminine and masculine characteristics, his abs are delicately outlined in thread.

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Free with membership

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Exhibition catalogue

*Radical Figures: Painting
in the New Millennium*

£24.99

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CHRISTIE'S

B I S T R O T H E Q U E

Cover: Dana Schutz

Imagine You and Me, 2018 (detail)

Oil on canvas, 223.5 × 223.5 cm

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