

Figuring Out Figurative Art

Contemporary Philosophers on
Contemporary Paintings

Edited by

**Damien Freeman and
Derek Matravers**



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Figuring Out Figurative Art

Also by Damien Freeman

Art's Emotions: Ethics, Expression and Aesthetic Experience (Acumen)

Also by Derek Matravers

Introducing Philosophy of Art in Eight Case Studies (Acumen)



"What is called Philosophy of Art usually lacks one of two things: either the philosophy, or the art."

(Friedrich Schlegel, 1797)

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Together with Routledge and Breese Little, we appreciate the assistance of the following commercial art galleries in obtaining permission to reproduce works of art by artists that they represent: Gagosian Gallery (John Currin, Dexter Dalwood and Paul Noble), Marlborough Gallery (Paula Rego), Pace Gallery (Adrian Ghenie and Yue Minjun), Stephen Friedman

Gallery (Ged Quinn), Victoria Miro Gallery (Chantal Joffe) and Wilkinson Gallery (George Shaw), as well as Breese Little Gallery (Tom de Freston).

This volume represents a new direction in philosophical writing, and we are grateful to the contributors for their enthusiasm in exploring the new possibilities presented by this project. As the volume has been completed within an eighteen-month time frame, we are also indebted to them for committing to write thoughtful contributions in a short space of time.

DTF
DCM

| The artists

John Currin (b. 1962, Boulder, Colorado; lives and works in New York) paints subjects that range from the domestic to the overtly erotic. These exceptionally refined and gloriously engaging paintings continue the intense debate within Currin's work that combines art-historical technique with contemporary reference. While some of Currin's new paintings are of flowers and exquisite china, most are depictions of hardcore eroticism taken from European pornography. Pornography is functional and, almost by definition, an unembellished celluloid or digital idiom. Indeed, one of the primary uses of photography is pornography, and a painting would struggle to claim to be as immediate – or undeniably in the moment – as a photograph. Currin's use of pornographic subject matter is both a challenge to these conventions and an acknowledgement of the spectral presence of photography for the contemporary painter.

Dexter Dalwood (b. 1960, Bristol; lives and works in London) seeks, in his paintings, to render historical events as unpopulated spaces constructed through literal visual quotation from the works of other artists. Events from recent history (e.g. Hurricane Katrina or the Poll Tax riots in London) are

imagined and represented as moments in time. Dalwood investigates how an event in time may subsequently achieve a visual existence or a place in the mind's eye, and presents this for subjective reconsideration – the bombing of Margaret Thatcher's hotel room in Brighton, in October 1984, for example, or the infamous Yalta conference of February 1945. Dalwood's works begin as small, precise collages, constructed by cutting up reproductions from magazines, catalogues and books. This process is central to Dalwood's conception of each painting as an image whose representation of a moment in art history is balanced by the more literal subject announced by the title of each work. References might be immediately apparent – a Picasso skull, a Richter abstraction – or more opaque – a still from the opening scene of Walt Disney's *Bambi*. The familiar, the vaguely recognized and the unattributable, in Dalwood's work, combine with authority to represent the cultural landscape of recent history, exploring visual language and the function of the imagination in understanding history.

Tom de Freston (b. 1983, London; lives and works in Oxford) creates narrative paintings that tend to take a particular theatrical, literary or art-historical source as a starting point. Recent projects have involved collaborations with theatre companies and poets. Literary and theatrical sources often act as a start point, before de Freston employs a wider range of image-making strategies and processes (photography, performance and collage) to develop ideas. His paintings often consist of domestic spaces, theatrical stages and barren landscapes populated with masked, animalistic or caricatured figures, dealing with dystopian narratives, mutated mythology and appropriated art-historical imagery. The scenes are frequently in danger of being engulfed by thick pools of paint, threatening the order with chaos. The paintings provide windows onto stages littered with uncanny signifiers, providing the viewers with access to worlds which are unknown but familiar.

Adrian Ghenie (b. 1977, Baia Mare, Romania; lives and works in Cluj, Romania and Berlin) investigates the darker currents of modern European history in his paintings, combining sources from historical books, archives, film stills and his imagination, to create simultaneously figurative and abstract images that address issues of personal and collective memory.

Exposing the horror and complexity of some of the most historically charged moments of the twentieth century, Ghenie's painterly and expressionistic canvases force the viewer to confront and bear witness to the past.

Chantal Joffe (b. 1969, London, where she continues to live and work) possesses a humorous eye for everyday awkwardness and an enlivening facility with paint, bringing a combination of insight and integrity to the genre of figurative art. Hers is a deceptively casual brushstroke. Whether in images a few inches square or ten feet high, fluidity combined with a pragmatic approach to representation seduces and disarms simultaneously. Almost always depicting women or girls, sometimes in groups but recently in iconic portraits, the paintings only waveringly adhere to their photographic source, instead reminding us that distortions of the brush or pencil can often make a subject seem more real. Joffe's paintings always alert us to how appearances are carefully constructed and codified, whether in a fashion magazine or the family album, and to the choreography of display. And yet, throughout her career, there is witty neutrality in a line-up that has given equal billing to catwalk models, porn actresses, mothers and children. Joffe questions assumptions about what makes a noble subject for art, and challenges what our expectations of feminist art might be. She ennobles the people she paints by rehabilitating the photographic image but, crucially, recognizes that it is paint itself, rather than attendant socio-political ideas, that gives her paintings complexity and keeps us looking.

Paul Noble (b. 1963, Dilston, England; lives and works in London) offers the viewer intricate graphite drawings that describe Nobson Newtown, a fictional place composed of labyrinthine edifices and deserted topography embedded with modules of dense detail. Employing cavalier projection – a cartographical method characterized by a high viewpoint – Noble meticulously delineates a wealth of elaborate architecture and open urban spaces. These phantasmagorical landscapes allude to sources as diverse as ancient Chinese scrolls, Fabergé eggs, Henry Moore's sculptures and paintings by Hieronymus Bosch. The encrypted fictions of Nobson Newtown are dizzyingly complex – visual articulations of the tensions between disorder, perversion and logical schema.

Ged Quinn (b. 1963, Liverpool; lives and works in Cornwall) creates work that, like Freud's notion of the uncanny, is both familiar and unfamiliar. Utilizing art-historical tropes to subtly introduce spirituality, temporality and myth into a larger framework of cultural and political discourses. The work is radical in its use of juxtapositions, not least those of romantic and modernist thought and imagery.

Paula Rego (b. 1935, Lisbon; lives and works in London) first won acclaim in Portugal with semi-abstract paintings that sometimes included collage elements culled from her own drawings. Their satiric wit and verve of line, sometimes applied to violent or political subjects, revealed gifts for storytelling that had been awakened in her as a child by folk-tales related by a great-aunt. In the late 1970s, Rego turned from collage to drawing directly in acrylic on paper. Using an essentially graphic style reminiscent of comic strips, she continued to produce figurative pictures that were spontaneous narratives rather than illustrations to literary texts. Her characters often took the form of animals for satirical effect. She developed a greater freedom and range of colour in her drawings, which inclined them more towards painting. In 1986, she turned to a naturalistic idiom with strongly modelled figures and a consistent light source, often in interior settings.

George Shaw (b. 1966, Coventry; lives and works in Devon) paints in Humbrol enamels, more usually associated with boyhood model-making, and bases his works on photographs which revisit landmarks remembered from his youth. Meticulously painted houses, pubs, underpasses and parks become autobiographical notes, frozen in time. Conflating memory and present-day reality, Shaw's works take on an uncanny quality, alluding to a murkier side of contemporary society and collective subconscious.

Yue Minjun (b. 1962, Heilongjiang, China; lives and works in Beijing) has been quoted as saying, "I always found laughter irresistible." Best known for his oil paintings depicting himself with his trademark smile, Yue is a leading figure in the Chinese contemporary art scene. He has exhibited widely and is recognized as one of the breakout stars of his generation. In his earlier work, surrealism had an especially strong influence on him. His self-portraits from the 1990s were the first to depict his easy, automatic

smile, but the figures' warmth masked underlying emotions. Yue has also been continuing his *Landscape with No One* series in which he removes figures from historical Chinese socialist paintings and well-known Western paintings. He states, "Those typical socialist paintings in China looked very realistic but were indeed surreal. They served for heroic fantasies, and the images of great people or the heroes in the paintings could well justify the fabricated scenes."

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Paula Rego, *War* (2003). Pastel on paper on aluminium, 160 × 120 cm.

John Currin, *The Dane* (2006). Oil on canvas, 122 × 81 cm.

Dexter Dalwood, *A View From A Window* (2006). Oil on canvas, 165 × 109 cm.

Tom de Freston, *Quartet – Stage One* (2012). Oil on canvas, 200 × 150 cm.

Tom de Freston, *Quartet – Stage Two* (2012). Oil on canvas, 200 × 150 cm.

Tom de Freston, *Quartet – Stage Four* (2012). Oil on canvas, 200 × 150 cm.

Chantal Joffe, *The Black Camisole* (2004). Oil on board, 300 × 120 cm.

Ged Quinn, *Hegel's Happy End* (2012). Oil on linen, 200 × 148 cm.

Dexter Dalwood, *Room 100 Chelsea Hotel* (1999). Oil on canvas, 182 × 213 cm.

Dexter Dalwood, *Hendrix's Last Basement* (2001). Oil on canvas, 203.2 × 213 cm.

Adrian Ghenie, *Dada is Dead* (2009). Oil and acrylic on canvas, 200 × 220 cm.

Adrian Ghenie, *Nickelodeon* (2008). Oil and acrylic on canvas, 230 × 420 cm.

Paul Noble, *Heaven* (2009). Pencil on paper, 114 × 286.5 cm.

Ged Quinn, *The Fall* (2007). Oil on canvas, 188 × 250 cm.

George Shaw, *No Returns* (2009). Humbrol enamel on board, 147.5 × 198 cm.

George Shaw, *This Sporting Life* (2009). Humbrol enamel on board, 43 × 53 cm.

Yue Minjun, *Untitled* (2005). Watercolour on paper, 78.5 × 109 cm.

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INTRODUCTION

Figurative art and figurative philosophy

Damien Freeman

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(Macbeth, act V, scene 5)

What is a Picasso-like horse-person doing on the cover of this book, clutching a broken dagger in his left hand; his feet poised at the edge of a chessboard suspended over the abyss of eternity; and his right eye staring desperately at the viewer? The image is taken from Tom de Freston's painting *A Poor Player that Struts and Frets his Hour*. The painting's title is taken from act V, scene 5, of *Macbeth*. In that scene, Macbeth receives the news that his wife is dead. Immediately, he responds to news of his misfortune by becoming philosophical.¹ He is struck by the futility of life, and captures this through the metaphor of a fretful actor whose performance is quickly forgotten. In the painting, de Freston achieves a thick impasto texture in the background that moves between sombre and fiery tones, and which evokes