

THE

BODY

IN

QUESTION

The Body in Question

November 30 - December 22, 2021

William Bailey, Matt Blackwell, Jeremy Long

Graham Nickson, Janice Nowinski

Rachel Rickert, Enrico Riley, Kyle Staver

Clintel Steed and Alun Williams

Curated by Ophir Agassi and Karen Wilkin

THE PAINTING CENTER

547 West 27th Street, Suite 500, New York, NY 10001

Tues-Sat, 11-6 pm, 212-343-1060, www.thepaintingcenter.org

The Body in Question/Ever Present

Since people first began making images the human figure has been a compelling subject. In the history of Western art, there have been centuries when the ability of trained artists was measured by how convincingly they were able to render figures, in motion and at rest. History painting, deemed the pinnacle of academic achievement, was the depiction of events from the bible, mythology, or the classical past, enacted by large scale figures, sometimes naturalistically presented, sometimes idealized to resemble classical sculpture as much as living human beings. Modernism rejected the naturalism, the idealization, and even the high value placed on the figure itself, forever expanding the possibilities of subject matter and approach. But as anyone who has been paying attention for the past two decades or so can attest, many artists have once again embraced the time-honored practice of painting the figure, in highly personal, even idiosyncratic ways, without rejecting the freedom to explore, improvise, and invent offered by modernism.

This exhibition asks “Why paint the figure today?” of ten contemporary painters: William Bailey, Matthew Blackwell, Jeremy Long, Graham Nickson, Janice Nowinski,

Rachel Rickert, Enrico Riley, Kyle Staver, Clintel Steed, and Alun Williams. Each of them answers the question differently – which is not surprising, since they come from different generations, have different backgrounds and formations, and live in different places. Yet they all share a belief in the history of art as a continuum, in the eloquence of the recognizable image, and in the expressive potency of color. To varying degrees, they reveal the history of the painting’s making and, often, celebrate the physicality of paint and the act of applying it to a surface. Yet each is a distinct and unmistakable individual whose work is unlike that of any of the others.

Jeremy Long and Rachel Rickert are excited by the challenge of translating intense perception of everyday, contemporary actuality into the fiction of paint on a flat surface, using seemingly insignificant quotidian happenings as starting points. Long dissects scenes of what we believe is the daily life of his family, responding to individual figures or small groups, and eventually combining them into larger compositions. Rickert transforms the tradition of

the male artist's presentation of intimacies, giving us a contemporary, female point of view of familiar rituals. William Bailey's and Graham Nickson's work is similarly rooted in real experience, but they deploy that experience to different ends. Bailey filters observation through memory and a deep knowledge of the art of the past, building near-abstract constructions that evoke specific places, enacted by figures who at once seem of the present and timeless. Much of Nickson's best known work could be described the same way. The heads included in this exhibition, all of people he knows well, are among his most intimate and direct works, virtuoso combinations of scrupulous observation and love of the materiality of paint. Enrico Riley's constantly evolving work draws upon his experience of specific practices and events, most recently the vernacular performance of music. His deceptively straightforward, beautifully painted images are informed equally by his own history and his knowledge of the history of art.

Matthew Blackwell and Janice Nowinski allude freely to the figure, constructing arcane, ambiguous narratives enlivened by the tension between the fact of paint and the will of the artist, walking a tightrope between apparent artlessness and

sophistication. Blackwell's imagery reflects everything from his knowledge of pop music and vintage cars to his politics, embodied by just plain gorgeous paint handling. Nowinski transubstantiates works of art, family photographs, and images found by chance into small, deceptively casual paintings that become increasingly intense and compelling over time. Kyle Staver boldly confronts history painting's traditional subject matter, drawing upon bible stories, myths, and vernacular archetypes, reinterpreting them from a highly individual, feminist-inflected, twenty-first century viewpoint that often shifts a tale's emphasis in unexpected ways. Clintel Steed conjures up suggestions of past and present, the history of art, observation, and present-day life, deploying dense pigment that both makes his short-hand images vividly present and threatens to subsume them. Art history and street smarts are equally present. Alun Williams offers us surrogate characters – shapes discovered in particular neighborhoods where celebrated or obscure events occurred – making these abstractions inhabit recognizable places, simultaneously affirming and making us question the significance of the figure both now and throughout the history of art.

All of the artists in this exhibition utilize the human form to convey a philosophy, an intellectual position, a social stance, and a personal point of view that can only be achieved with the presence of the figure in the picture. While we can be wholly engaged (and satisfied) by the formal elements in their work and by the evidence of their pictorial intelligence and accomplishment, on another level, we can identify with the painted human beings, mentally transporting ourselves into the picture or measuring the image with which we are presented against our own experience. Obviously the artists in this exhibition are not the only painters today who are finding fresh excitement in this time-honored subject, but they are a representative group. Their work not only bears witness to the continued relevance of the figure, in formal and conceptual terms, but it can also make us question our purpose and even raise doubts about our future. For the moment, at least, we are here.

Curators:

Ophir Agassi and Karen Wilkin, 2021

William Bailey

Afternoon in Umbria II, 2010-2011

Tempera on wood panel

19.75 x 24 inches

Courtesy of Betty Cuninghame Gallery



Matt Blackwell
While You Were Sleeping, 2021
Oil and collage on canvas
43 x 70 inches



Jeremy Long
Large Study #3, 2020
Oil on canvas
48 x 60 inches



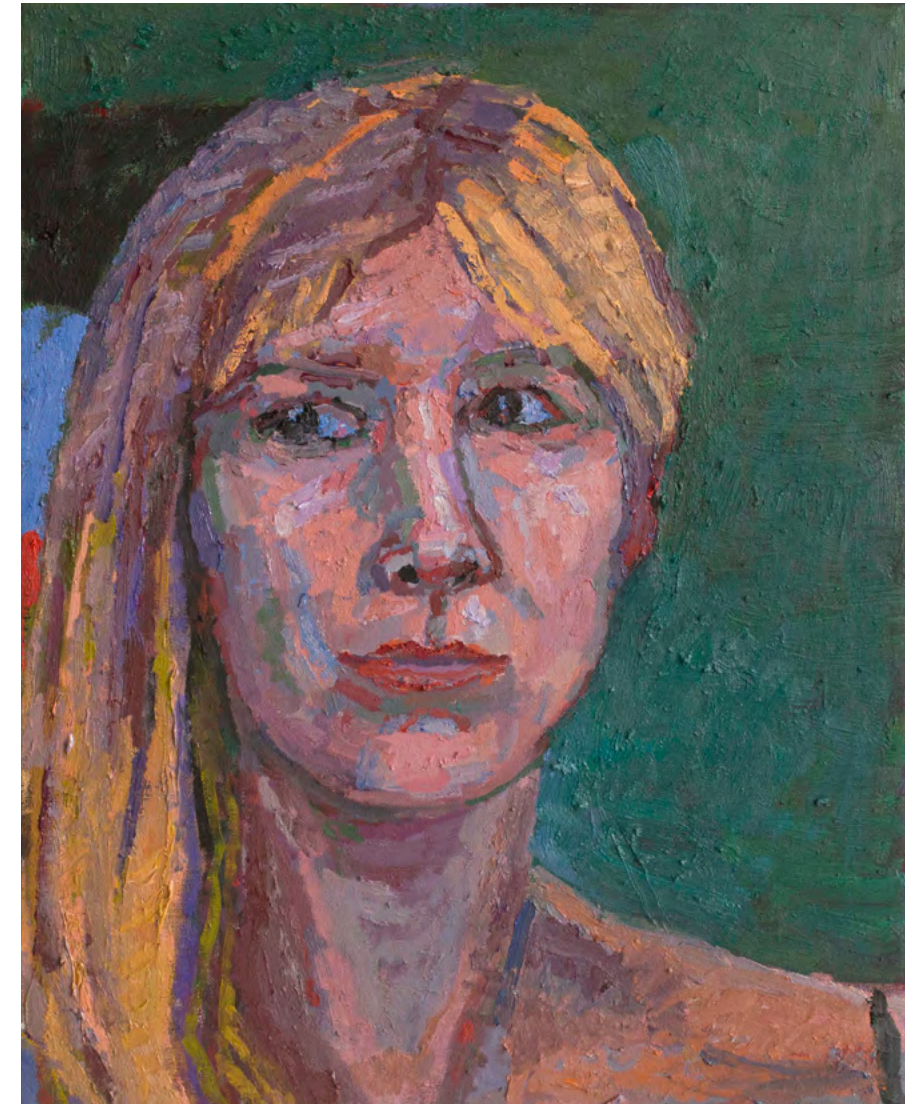
Graham Nickson

Glancing, 2019

Oil on canvas

20 x 16 inches

Courtesy of Betty Cuninghame Gallery



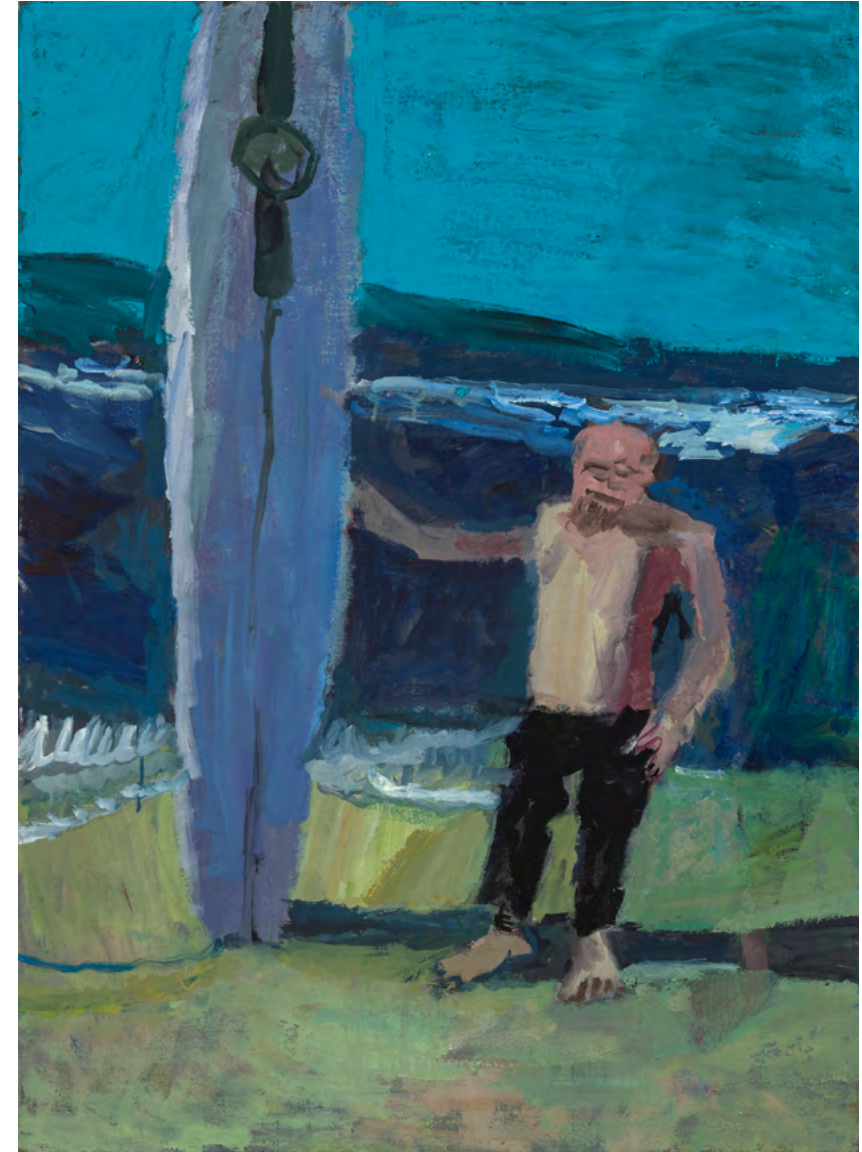
Janice Nowinski

Guy with Surfboard, 2020

Oil on canvas

30 x 22 inches

Courtesy of the Artist and Thomas Erben Gallery





Rachel Rickert
Gridlock, 2019
Oil on canvas
36 x 30 inches

Enrico Riley

Untitled: Drummer, Keeper of the Forest, 2021

Oil and watercolor on canvas

42 x 36 inches

Courtesy of the Artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery



Kyle Staver

Death and the Maiden, 2019

Oil on canvas

50 x 70 inches

Courtesy of the Artist and Zürcher Gallery



Clintel Steed
Fallen Warrior #1, 2021
Oil on canvas
48 x 36 inches



Alun Williams

Thomas Paine Visiting the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, 2018

Oil and acrylic on canvas

57.5 x 45.25 inches

Courtesy of the Artist and Anne Barrault



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Design: Shazzi Thomas

