

The Arts



Michael Werner Gallery, NY

Back to the Figure

Recognizable forms are showing up in the works of a new wave of contemporary painters

By Paul Trachtman

The death of painting was first predicted in the middle of the 19th century, when the advent of photography seemed to snatch reality out of the painter's hand. "If photography is allowed to stand in for art in some of its functions," wrote French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire in 1859, "it will soon supplant or corrupt it completely." Artists have been trying to come to terms with photography's implications ever since.

Impressionists such as Monet and Renoir, rejecting the static, mechanical imagery of photographs as well as the stale academic painting of their time, set out to paint their own impressions of how the eye perceives light and atmosphere in nature. Some of their contemporaries, including Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec, took a different tack. They began using photographs for inspiration—cropping their images as the camera might, for example, and introducing distortions of perspective based on the camera's lens.

Then, one hundred years ago, Matisse and Picasso made the radical paintings that would define a new era of modern art. Matisse disfigured the figure with his bulging *Blue Nude* in 1907, painting from a photograph to free his imagination and break habits formed by drawing from life. Picasso also used photographs to paint his 1907 *Les Femmes d'Alger*, with each

figure seeming like a multiple exposure, seen from different angles at the same time—a decisive step into Cubism.

As the 20th century progressed, painters such as Wassily Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock abandoned the concept of art as representation altogether, producing canvases that contained no recognizable objects at all. In their "abstract" works, the paint itself became the subject. By the 1960s, conceptual artists—inspired by Marcel Duchamp and other Dadaists of the 1920s—adopted the view that art should aim at the mind, not the eye, turning out paintings in which the idea behind the work was more important than the work itself. With a few obvious exceptions—Pop Art, Photo Realism and artists such as David Hockney—representational or figurative art was largely considered a thing of the past by the end of the 20th century. But in recent years, a number of contemporary painters have begun reaching back to the roots of modern art to find new modes of expression. They are mixing the human figure and other recognizable forms with elements of abstraction and ambiguous narrative in ways not seen before.

"The excitement around my profession right now is tremendous," says Joachim Pissarro, a curator of painting and drawing at New York's Museum of Modern Art. "Thirty years ago, there was all this talk of the end of painting. Today nobody cares about that." For the young generation, he says, "the polarization between abstraction and representation that existed in the last half of the 20th century is just meaningless. What we're seeing now is very interesting. And totally new."

Scattered from Brooklyn to Trinidad to Leipzig, Germany, the artists represented in these pages are renewing "a belief in painting," says Laura Hoptman, senior curator at New York City's New Museum of Contemporary Art.

Peter Doig

"When people started to become interested in my work in the late 1980s, painting was completely off the agenda," says Peter Doig, a 49-year-old Scot living in Trinidad. "What the galleries considered cutting edge was all conceptual—painting about painting, art that said something about the way it is made. I deliberately worked against that. For me, once you're a painter, you're constantly compelled to look at the world as a potential subject for painting. And that goes from seeing something on the street, to seeing something in a movie, in a magazine, everything really."

Doig's studio, in a renovated rum distillery in Trinidad's capital city, Port of Spain, is full of large canvases depicting junglelike landscapes, paint-smearred rivers and ambiguous figures. When he left London to move to Trinidad in 2003, many of his friends called it "doing a Gauguin," after the French artist Paul Gauguin, who moved to Tahiti in 1891 to become one with nature. Doig's style is sometimes compared to Gauguin's, but his approach to painting is quite different. His method hinges on a kind of information processing that often starts with a photograph, he says,

because painting from photographs distances him from what is real or true. "Why does a painting have to be truthful?" he asks.

Doig has made several paintings from an old postcard he bought in a London junk shop that depicts a river scene in India. "When I paint directly from nature," he says, "I get too caught up in trying to get it right. Using photography, or a postcard, allows me just to take what I want and leave the rest out. I made a photograph of the tiny guru in the postcard, and took another photo of that, and I blew it up so it became a blurry blob, and I painted from that, and he became a sort of bearded man, something mysterious and black. I don't know if he's a religious figure, or a fanatic, but there's something kind of spiritual about him."

He points to a 9-by-12-foot canvas of a sketchy figure climbing a palm tree, hugging the trunk and peering out from an abstract void of brushstrokes, drips and cracks. "Those drips and cracks are the kinds of beautiful things in painting that are unique," he says. "You take chances and they're given to you, but I'd hate them to become a mannerism or gimmick." It was the figure, however, that most struck SITE Santa Fe director Laura Heon when the painting was shown at the museum's 2006 Biennial. "In a sense, it's a return to humanism," she says. "There's something very generous about making a picture of a human being."

A major retrospective of Doig's work will open at the Tate Modern in London in February.