



PAINTERS ON PAINTING

ELLEN ALTFEST — APOSTOLOS GEORGIU
IMRAN QURESHI — HELEN JOHNSON
HENRY TAYLOR — MARK SADLER — ROSE WYLIE
LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE

Apostolos Georgiou, Untitled,
2012, acrylic on canvas,
2.2 × 2.2 m

At a time of revolution in digital technologies, when making extraordinary images has never been technically easier, painting persists. *Jennifer Higgin* asked eight artists to share their thoughts on the whys and wherefores of figurative painting



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is happening around me, whether
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personally or emotionally.'*

IMRAN QURESHI



3

1
Imran Qureshi
Moderate Enlightenment, 2009,
gouache and gold leaf on wasli,
29 × 24 cm

2
Helen Johnson
Postcolonial Feminist Drama, 2013,
synthetic polymer paint on canvas,
2.5 × 1.8 m

3
Henry Taylor
Robert Randy Taylor, *'Best in Class'*,
2013, acrylic on canvas,
2.4 × 2 m



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2

with Hyderabad city – which was a site of demonstrations, road blocks and general daily violence – I understood ‘still life’ in a completely different way. Instead of choosing a white sheet of paper, like my classmates, I chose that day’s newspaper, which was full of news about unrest and agitations, and drew the piles of chairs on that. It was my first work of art in that school.

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Imran Qureshi lives in Lahore, Pakistan. In 2013, he was awarded Deutsche Bank’s ‘Artist of the Year’; and had solo exhibitions at the Museo d’Arte Contemporanea Roma, Rome, Italy; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA; and the Zahoor Al Akhlaq Gallery, Lahore. His work was also included in ‘The Encyclopedic Palace’ at the 55th Venice Biennale. In 2014, he will have a solo exhibition at Ikon, Birmingham, UK.

4

HELEN JOHNSON

Painting is a space for the critical deployment of ambiguity, wit, failure and unknowing. Being a painter today doesn’t mean seeing painting as some kind of anachronistic refuge, or thinking that the modernist project of the medium can be rehabilitated, or even continue to be flogged. I am interested in the complexities, loadings and problems of painting as devices for producing meaning today, informed by a new range of conditions. I am not interested in using painting to defend itself, make statements or draw conclusions, but to open spaces for reflective thought, where a multiplicity of positions can be recognized, particularly as a means of resisting the imposition of a fixed narrative.

In terms of an art-historical conversation, I feel connected to some strategies of postwar German painting because I think they can be of use in Australia today as a means of addressing this country’s fraught and unresolved relationship to history since colonization: for instance, the paintings Martin Kippenberger produced during the mid-80s, when he mobilized painting’s complexities in the service of a broader cultural critique. In an Australian context, I see these sorts of strategies in the work of Juan Davila, Geoff Lowe/A Constructed World, Raquel Ormella, and Kate Smith, for example.

Increasingly, I shift toward an ambiguous treatment of the figure, away from anything that might be read as a portrait, in favour of bodies that have been cobbled together, their heads adapted from fragments, their clothing stamped onto the canvas using actual clothes that define their dimensions. They are not knowable people, but are more like stand-ins for subjects, usually life-sized or larger. The scale invites something like a social engagement, and the figures, resisting being reduced to depiction, reflect the viewer back at themselves, making them think about their own position.

Painting is freighted with what I think of as productive neuroses: its status as an emblem of bourgeois cultural production, the idea of it as anachronistic, its readiness for commodity status – these things are residual in the medium itself and can be used to make meaning.

The space between figuration and abstraction is slippery. I think one can choose whether to plot a point between them but it is a more open, individual decision than it once was. ‘Figurative painter’ is still a dirty phrase in some circles but I think that’s a reason to take it on. The role of politics in my practice attaches to the question of whether there can be a politics of the spectator, as Hannah Arendt proposed, or whether politics requires action. As Rosemary Trockel once said: ‘Art works on the continuation of politics by other means. But direct change through art is probably more like a fairy tale worth believing in.’ For me, painting does not constitute a political action as such, but can offer distance from the established narrative, can change our sense of ourselves in the world. Painting figuratively certainly has to do with making pictures that are easily engaged with: this can open up the way to a contemplation of more difficult ideas.

Helen Johnson lives and works in Melbourne, Australia. In 2013, she had a solo show at Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, and was in a joint exhibition with Parker Ito at Prism, Los Angeles, USA. Her exhibition at Minerva, Sydney, Australia, opens in May.

5

HENRY TAYLOR

Like most kids, I grew up with very few real role models. The thing I always wanted to be was an athlete: first a football player, then a baseball player like my cousin, Don Buford. But when I was diagnosed with a benign tumour and had to have a metal plate put in my head in the 11th grade, I gave that dream up. My mother always told me ‘put your best foot forward’, so I tried acting, then I tried something else and eventually I started painting and that was largely because of Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez who had their own comic book called *Love and Rockets* (1982–96). In junior high school I began making art and I simply returned to the subject or thing in life I loved the most – well, almost the most.

Not that I’m well known or anything, but the fact that I’m black (and there’s not that many of us) and have had some exposure doesn’t automatically mean that I’ll be included in ‘art-historical conversation’. If you’re not relevant, no-one’s going to give a damn. Being relevant, I feel, has perhaps given me some access to Tupac, Biggie, Gil Scott-Heron, Lead Belly, Basquiat, David Hammons, Kendrick Lamar (my daughter Jade likes Kendrick and so do I), Miles – black artists who were and are relevant and bring something to the ‘art-historical’ table where people often do a lot of talking.

I like the term ‘figurative painter’ more than some of the things I’ve been called (that’s if you’re trying to label me a figurative painter). I make all types of paintings that have figures in them but the figure is behind bars or walking a pitbull or a mastiff, like in my work *Walking with Vito* (2008). Or, for example, I made a painting about my grandfather, Ardmore Taylor, who everyone called Mo, and who trained horses in Texas. He’s sitting on a porch with a pistol and shotgun, alluding to the lifestyle he lived as well as died: he was shot at the age of 33 in 1933. Years earlier, he had his arm shot off as a result of some white people trying to steal his horses. My grandmother poured kerosene on his arm and bandaged it up and he got on his horse to look for the folks who tried to rob him. He was ambushed and killed on a dark road in Texas and my father (an only child, who was nine at the time) went with my grandmother and picked up his body and took him home. I know the story well because my father would drink and often call me in the middle of the night; maybe he was woken up by the memory of that night, but he’d call out as if the incident was taking place right then. There are six boys in my family; I’m the youngest and whenever my dad introduced us to his friends he’d say: ‘Meet my bullets.’ He was referring to the last three, as we were close in age; the older three I never hung with. So, I try to say a little more, i.e. I paint a figure, but often times there’s more to it. It’s like a JUNGLE SOMETIMES.

What role does politics play in my work? Well, you talking to me? This is America and if you’re black in America it’s easy for politics to permeate your work. As a journalism student, I developed a habit of reading every page of the newspaper looking for source material for my art works. I did a painting called *Homage to a Brother* (2007) after reading about a young African-American brother named Sean Bell who was murdered. I didn’t know when or if I’d even use an image of him, but I did. I woke up one morning before a show I had at the Studio Museum in Harlem and picked up the newspaper clipping and said to myself, ‘that could have been my son, or my nephew’, but I felt it was the thing to do since I was going to New York and Sean was from Queens and was passionate about baseball. That was my green light. Represent Baby Baabay! My show last year at Blum & Poe was inspired by my life, and those around me and those before me. In one room I painted portraits of black sharecroppers, but there was a door with ‘Principal’s Office’ on it, as that’s where I received my early indoctrination to being treated unfairly, as the teacher always found a reason to send me to the office or put me in the closet as punishment. The last room in that exhibition was the ‘Probation Office’. This is what I know – and a lot of black males know – about incarceration. So, my life is political and full of love. Dear momma!

My community means a lot to me. If I made abstract paintings I would get no love from my family or peeps. I can easily elaborate but I think by now if anyone’s reading this article they know ‘Brenda’s got a baby’. (That’s a song by Tupac.)

Henry Taylor lives in Los Angeles, USA. In 2013, he had a solo show at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, and his work was included in ‘The Beer Show’, The Green Gallery, Milwaukee, USA; ‘Body Language’, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, USA; the 2013 Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, USA; and ‘Contemporary Galleries: 1980 – Now’, Museum of Modern Art, New York. His solo exhibition at UNTITLED, New York, opens in March.