

A short version of this appeared as “Back to the Figure” in Smithsonian magazine, issue of October 2007

Original text:

New Painters

Dana Schutz and Peter Doig are leading painting back to the figure.

by Paul Trachtman

Uncorrected 1st Draft

The death of painting was first lamented in the mid-1800s, with the birth of photography. It seemed as if the camera had snatched truth out of the painter’s hand. French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire wrote painting’s obituary in 1859, noting the public’s belief that “photography and art are the same thing.” Although generations of painters have carried on, the death notices keep cropping up. One of today’s liveliest painters, Dana Schutz, stands among a dozen new canvases in her Brooklyn studio and says, “I first heard that painting is dead in 1996 in the student cafeteria. It was this weird thing, like a rumor!”

Schutz, now 30, is something like a rumor herself: her fame has spread through the art world as fast as she can turn out paintings. In canvases lit up with what she calls her “extroverted colors”—hot pinks and reds, electric purples and jungle greens—and populated by the unsettling figures of a 21st century imagination, she is brushing off decades of postmodern handwringing about whether painting can mean anything anymore. She sees the 20th Century as “a long time ago,” and sees her paintings as part of a world we haven’t figured out yet.

She is not alone. A new wave of painters is shaking up the art world with a new attitude, embracing the figure, hinting at narrative, and googling

imagery in ways not seen before. They share an attitude more than any style, and are scattered from Brooklyn to London to Leipzig. What they are renewing, says Laura Hoptman, director of New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art, is "a belief in painting." One of the figurative painters she points to is Peter Doig, a 48 year old London expatriate living in Trinidad, who puts it this way:

"At the time I emerged in the late 1980s, when people started to become interested in my work, painting was completely off the agenda. What the galleries considered cutting edge was all conceptual work. The only new painting they showed was 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 and Schutz use very different kinds of imagery. The New York gallery owner who represents Schutz, Zach Feuer, says of them: "whereas Doig would paint a beautiful palm tree, Dana would paint her landlord." Doig paints directly from photographs, and Schutz never does, although she may use them as information. Doig is often compared to Gauguin (which dismays him), while Schutz is often seen as an Expressionist (which annoys her). But they are both passionate about painting, and making it new: After decades of art gazing at itself, these painters are telling stories about the world, about people you might recognize or know.

To describe what she sees in both Doig and Schutz, Hoptman reaches for a word from 19th century French painting, "cuisine," for the use of paint that makes a canvas a pleasure to look at. "They both have *great* cuisine,"

she says. “The other thing they have in common is that their work looks very old fashioned, what you’d call ‘*arriere garde*’ (rear guard). It’s revolutionary in its backwardness, and I think that’s fabulous.”

Hoptman’s description gets at the heart of what’s going on. It was just 100 years ago that 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 1905, using a photograph as his source to free his imagination and break habits formed by drawing from life. Picasso, too, drew on photographs to paint his 1907 *Damoiselles D’Avignon*, a decisive step into cubism. They both became iconoclasts, image-breakers, in order to see the forms of their world in new ways. Even before they died, however, artists were turning away from the world altogether, replacing it with abstract art and its self-reflective offshoots.

Abstract art never completely did away with realism. There were figurative flings with Pop Art and Photo-Realism, some conceptual ‘conceptual artists’ like Gerhard Richter in Germany who painted from photographs to prove painting had nothing left to say, and some sincere figurative artists like David Hockney always painting against the tide. But by the century’s end, figurative painting was largely considered a thing of the past. Yet now, in 2007, it seems that painters are reaching back to the roots of modern art, using photography and imagination much as Matisse and Picasso did to find new forms in the world.

“Maybe we’re *refiguring* the figure,” Dana Schutz says. “Making paintings about painting just sounds crazy. All that talk about the paint, the drips, the stretcher bars, is sort of really boring. It’s like some bad idea that people got carried away with. When I look at paintings, I don’t think ‘Oh,

paint! Look at all that paint!’ I think artists now want to be making meaning and having an effect. It’s very different from the 20th century.”

Peter Doig, although a bit more rooted in the 20th century, recalls a similar sense arising in his student days. “There was a time when people were talking about Pollack or de Kooning paintings, about the way they were made. And when I was a student there was a reaction against that. It almost seemed like an embarrassing thing to talk about the brushstroke, the gesture, the color, this kind of swooning description of all the juices and all that. That seemed to be like talking about icing on the cake, rather than what the painting was about. Maybe we’ve come back to the stage where there’s nothing to talk about anymore, and you’re actually just left with the painting. It’s a way of painting reinventing itself.”

There is a key difference between 1907 and 2007, Schutz points out: “Now there are no ideologies, no avant garde movements that could frame new work for people as in the past. So, where does that leave everybody? I don’t know. It can be really frustrating for a lot of people, because everything feels like it becomes fashion. Or what’s *in*. I think artists end up being individual. More and more I feel like the most radical thing art can do is give someone an experience they feel is unfamiliar in some way.”

“What we’re seeing is very exciting,” says Joachim Pissarro, a curator of painting and drawing at MoMA, the Museum of Modern Art in New York (which has work by both Doig and Schutz in its collection). “The excitement around my profession right now is tremendous. Ten years ago, among young curators, no one was feeling this way, and there was all this talk of the end of painting. Today, nobody cares about that.” Pissarro, who frequently visits artists’ studios and art schools in this country and abroad, sees a striking paradox wherever he goes. “These new people come out of school super

skilled—hyper skilled. They really know their stuff, their painting and history and theory. They are totally invested in making a very, very good painting. But after that, they are afraid to trust the power of the image that comes out of it. The mystique of the early 20th century for the icon, the image itself, is gone. Vaporized!”

Pissarro’s colleague at MoMA, Curator of Photography Roxana Marcoci, points out that in the 1960s painters like Richter, and then Luc Tuymans in Belgium, painted blurry or chalky portraits from photographs to undermine all faith in images. Traditionally a portrait was ranked among the highest forms of painting, a still life the lowest. But a portrait made from a photograph is more like a still life, something not so real. “These artists knew exactly what they were doing,” says Marcoci. “Tuymans went on to create what he calls the authentic forgery, making his paintings look old with a faded palette, so that they look old from the moment they are painted. So everything is sort of contaminated.”

In a sense, the Europeans were carrying on where Dada and Marcel Duchamp left off, devaluing art to make a statement about society. (A recent Tuymans portrait of Condaleeza Rice is on view at MoMA.) But their techniques were often picked up by students merely as style. Peter Doig recalls the Richter vogue in his student days: “I can’t tell you how many painters I know who bought big wide brushes and used them to blur their paintings,” he says. “It went through the art schools like a rash. After that it was Tuymans-like paintings, a detached suggestion of forms, very cloudy, seductive paintings.”

“I was one of those students making Luc Tuymans paintings,” Dana Schutz says. She was struck by the way Tuymans painted a surface, more than the politics behind it. “I thought they were so chalky and awesome!

There was just enough there to make a picture, like the residue of an image. His paintings seemed warm and cool at the same time. That was very exciting at the time. I was trying to make paintings look photographic even though they weren't from photos." After a while, though, she developed "a totally different attitude towards painting-- an '*I'm not an old European man!*' attitude," she says, laughing. "I started using saturated colors, making more painterly paintings. When I first made them they seemed so gaudy, I remember thinking, 'god, they're awful!'"

But for Doig and Schutz, there was no going back to the imagery of a Matisse or a Gauguin as they brought the figure and color back to painting. The abstract and conceptual painters had done their work, and it was hard to believe in an iconic image anymore. Doig's response to this is to paint from photographs, as if putting the camera between the world and the painting does away with any question of what's true. "I'm not interested in that," he says. "Why does a painting have to be truthful?"

A visit to Doig's studio in Trinidad, set in a renovated rum distillery in Port of Spain, a city throbbing with steel drums and traffic jams, reveals a world of painted nature that makes nature pale by comparison. Large canvases lean against gray walls, filled with suggested jungles, paint smeared rivers, and ambiguous figures that may be no more than a scrawl or a smudge. Doig is a kind of magician, able to conjure a bird or a bather from a mere flick of the brush.

He cuts a strapping figure, 6 feet tall, with a wide eyed face, balding pate and beard that make him look like a self-portrait by Cezanne. His wife Bonnie and five children keep him engaged in reality, but his studio is another world. "The studio is always a kind of place of fantasy, of memory, of imagining," he says. "My first studio was in a London basement with no

natural light, a horrible place that stank of sewage, but it was a great place because it was free.” He wasn’t interested in “painting what’s out the window,” anyway.

In 2003 Doig moved to Trinidad, where he had spent several childhood years, and brought with him a hand-colored postcard he’d picked up in a London junk shop. “It depicts a place in southern India,” he says. “It’s a river scene, and everyone in it seems to be engaged with other people, there’s something going on, and there’s this one figure, the size of a match head, just sitting looking out, in a robe or something, so I called him the guru. But a lot of what’s in the postcard reminds me of things I see here in Trinidad at night, where it’s sort of dimly lit and you see all these shadowy figures walking around, just like little bits of color.”

Doig has made several large and small paintings from this postcard, called “Music of the Future,” and his approach is an example of how he thinks about painting. “When I paint directly 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.” In his Trinidad studio, painting from the postcard bought in London of a place in India, he says, “I could sort of paint Trinidad by proxy.” For Doig, painting is a kind of information processing: “I took 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.” In its latest incarnation the postcard image is now a 6x9 foot painting that Doig has been working on for 3 1/2 years. (ck 2x3 meters)

This process is about as far from Gauguin's going native in Tahiti as one can imagine, yet the comparison is often made. "When I moved to Trinidad, pretty well everyone I knew said, 'Oh, you're doing a Gauguin!'" he says. And he is often called "a romantic painter." Yet he can paint like a de Kooning, leaving drips and splatters over the canvas, and any conceptual artist would appreciate his putting the camera before the brush. In fact, Doig seems to have merged qualities of abstract painting, conceptual thinking, and early modern figuration into a style that is all his own. His recent paintings will be shown at the Michael Werner gallery in New York in November (dates tk); in London at the Hayward Gallery as part of a show called *The Paintings of Modern Life* (October 4-December 30); and a major retrospective of his work will open the Tate Modern in London in February 2008.

Leaving the studio, as Doig drives his pick up through downtown Port of Spain traffic, he suddenly pulls to the curb, gets out and points his digital camera towards a brightly colored stack of beer crates across the street. A tall black man in a t-shirt strides over and says, "Where are you carrying that picture, man?" Doig responds, "Oh, I might take it to my studio to make a painting. I'm an artist." There's a long silence, and then the questioner says, "Okay, I dig, man." Driving on, Doig sees the moment as a metaphor for how he makes paintings. "You can get sort of intoxicated by what you see," he says. "But then you have to ask what's yours to take, and what's not."

In the Brooklyn studio where Dana Schutz paints, she puts her imagination, rather than a camera, between the world and the canvas. (A show of her work at the Douglas Hyde gallery in Dublin opens this fall). Her studio is in an old industrial building turned into an artist's co-op along the Gowanus Canal, once celebrated by Thomas Wolfe for its "great symphonic

stink.” Schutz is a tall, pencil-thin Midwesterner (from Michigan) with a brown tangle of curls, deep eyes, and an arabesque mouth that Matisse might have drawn. She emerged from Columbia University’s graduate art program just five years ago, married her artist classmate Ryan Johnson two years ago, and is relieved to have recently turned 30. “Now maybe people can quit saying I’m barely out of my teens!” she laughs.

She has come of age with the internet, a fact reflected in recent paintings about telepathic emails and a self portrait searching the web—a New York Times profile last year was headlined, “Portrait of the Artist as a Paint-Spattered Googler.” She is part of a generation that doesn’t trust the media to tell the truth, and that knows what Photoshop can do to any image. She recalls the day she saw Saddam Hussein’s statue being toppled on the news. “My mother called me right away,” she says. “and for her it was a very nostalgic moment, like *the* moment, like the man stepping on the moon, the really poignant, iconic image. I just didn’t get it! I thought, ‘that’s so staged!’ And even now I think, ‘they didn’t really land on the moon. It’s all a set.’”

It’s a liberating thought, for Schutz. Her paintings are spaces where the fake and the real are hard to tell apart. “I know they’re constructed, but I believe in the images when I’m painting,” she says. “If everything is fake, then everything is real.” She often works through a series of paintings to see the possibilities of an idea, creating figures that seem to take on a life of their own as she puts them into different scenarios. She has a kind of “what if” mind, like that of a computer programmer inventing virtual realities. One series of paintings is populated by figures she calls “self eaters,” a stripped-down form of people who survive by feeding on parts of their own bodies, and then reconstructing themselves. The paintings, with their lush

colors and fantastic imagery, have been greeted as a new Expressionism, and it is easy to interpret them in terms of social ills, from anorexic models to ravenous consumerism; or even as glimpses into the artist's psyche. But taking Schutz paintings at face value misses their point.

'I'm not an expressionist,' Schutz protests, "*I'm not!* These paintings are not about me expressing how I feel, at all." The self-eaters, she says, "started out being cyclical, almost autonomous figures. It's a pictorial solution, you could take them apart and put them together again. It's like they just became material. The way I thought about these figures was that they couldn't even know that they were experiencing pain because they're not aware of other things besides themselves."

Schutz doesn't deny that her paintings have some social significance, and are sometime inspired by what she sees on the internet, or is thinking about. One painting, *The Autopsy of Michael Jackson*, imagines that event to explore the idea of the self-made man. "I think about how we can reorganize ourselves, like before you're even born people can pick out different genes for you that would be good for this or that. It's become increasingly like there is no figure, or you can kind of choose that figure.

"I want these paintings to start somewhere in the public imagination," she says, "where people feel like they could know that story, like plastic surgery or production-consumption, or the ways we make alternative histories for ourselves. There's a potential for narrative, but it's not the kind of story where you can just fill in the blanks."

Ambiguous stories are what make many of the new figurative painters so interesting. Doig may start with a straightforward photo, but in making the painting he reduces the information, blurs things, moves figures around until all that's left is "some type of narrative." Schutz wants to leave her

narratives up in the air. “It would really suck if they’re locked down,” she says, “because then you’re telling the viewer what to think, or what you know.”

Joachim Pissarro sees this kind of ambiguity as “a fear of narrative, almost posted up on the surface: It’s telling you ‘This means nothing. Don’t look for it, you won’t find it.’” That could be the trademark of the new Leipzig painters. In Germany, since the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, a kind of ambiguous realism has emerged that seems to say: no one knows *what* to think. In the Eastern city of Leipzig, 34 year old painter Neo Rauch and a group of younger artists have wowed Western collectors and museum curators with paintings of aimless figures wandering through empty landscapes, vaguely surreal streets, and blank interiors. The painters are products of the Leipzig Art Academy, which for decades taught Old World draftsmanship and painting skills to artists destined for the mills of socialist realism. When the wall fell, Rauch worked out his own style. He describes his paintings as allegories that incorporate East Bloc comics and commercial graphics, with a personal iconography that remains private. “Yes, there’s some kind of story behind those pictures,” says Roxana Marcoci, “but then you don’t know from where to grab it, you don’t know to what it refers.”

Marcoci is the curator of a current show at MoMA called “Comic Abstraction.” (It runs until June 11, 2007) It’s a show of artists who use comics—where cartoons and words clearly tell a story—as a source of paintings that erase literal meaning: for example, French artist Phillippe Parron’s comic style painting of a protest rally with blank speech bubbles rising from the crowd. Marcoci traces the current taste for ambiguity back to a 1960s French writer, Francois Leotard, who described postmodernism as “the end of the big narrative.” The small, ambiguous narratives in

contemporary painting, she says, “make you read between the lines, look harder, not having it all figured out from the start.”

In the last half of the 20th century, abstraction and representation were, for the most part, at the opposite poles of painting. It was as if the abstract painters owned the paint—the influential critic Clement Greenberg called them the “painterly” painters—and those who still clung to some kind of figure could have what was left, images, ideas, emotions, maybe even beauty. Their plight was explained by Germany’s wise-cracking conceptual painter Martin Kippenberger, who once painted Jesus on the Cross with a fried egg floating in front of him, a finger poking out of its yolk. “In painting you have to be on the look out: what windfall is still left for you to paint,” he said. “Justice hasn’t been done to the egg, justice hasn’t been done to the fried egg; Warhol’s already got the banana. So you take a form...If you turn it around this way and that, you’ll come up with something. Maybe even social politics, or jokes.” (cat. 24) Jasper Johns, the painter of iconic targets and flags, expressed the sentiment straight up: “I don’t feel overloaded with ideas that I have to express urgently,” he told New Yorker writer Calvin Tompkins recently. “But I don’t know that I’ve ever felt that way.” (12/11/06 p.85)

Now, in this new decade, painting figures suddenly seems urgent again. Getting a body of his work ready for a big show, the 2006 Biennial at SITE Santa Fe, Peter Doig made a last painting—a 9 x 11 1/2 foot canvas (3x3.5 meters) with a sketchy figure climbing a palm tree, hugging the trunk and peering out from an abstract void of brushstrokes, full of drips and cracks. “Those are the kinds of beautiful things in painting that are unique to painting,” he says. “You take chances and they’re given to you, but I’d hate them to become a mannerism or gimmick.” Doig started the painting at 9

p.m. the night before the movers were set to arrive. He used a centuries-old medium called “distemper,” pigment mixed directly into rabbit’s skin glue, which dries quickly. The painting was finished by the morning, just in time for the movers to cart it off.

Looking at it on a wall at SITE Santa Fe, the museum’s director Laura Heon sees it as something new, unhinged from history. “You think of Greenbergian ideas about the essence of painting, all those issues of abstraction” she says. “Yet the picture is distinctly figurative. In a sense, it’s a return to humanism. There’s something very generous about making a picture of a human being. They sort of need you, they call out to you. A glance is accustomed to a glance returned.”

In Dana Schutz’ studio, there’s no hard line between abstract and figurative painting. “I don’t think of them as being something separate,” she says, and the figures she paints can seem as abstract as her thoughts. In a new painting she’s working on, of a man and woman driving on vacation, the figures in the car seem almost plastic, as if they’re melting in a hot Hawaiian landscape. “The way I’m thinking about them,” she says, “is that in the future if you were looking back at us, what features would remain, in a slightly distorted or generalized way, like people whose head is like a potato or something. But even if there’s not so much information on that guy’s face, you could know him.”

MoMA’s Joachim Pissarro looks at Schutz’ work and is reminded of the abstract painter Phillip Guston who, in the 1950s, added grotesque, comics-style figures to his canvases. Back then, Guston was ostracized by most other New York painters; his friend Willem de Kooning, whose semi-abstract “Woman” paintings also offended purists, coined the expression “homeless abstraction” for such work. “I think for the young generation,”

says Pissarro, “the polarization between abstraction and representation is just meaningless. Schutz, for example, works at her representational painting in a way that Guston worked at his abstract paintings, making imagery but not giving a damn what the visual outcome could be like.” Pissarro sees even more of this in the art schools where “there’s an embracing of the two categories, functioning hand in hand, not against each other. It’s very interesting, and totally new.”

In the graduate students’ lounge at Columbia University’s School of the Arts, in an old building where Manhattan Project scientists began to design the atomic bomb, a group of young painters seems to have buried the past. They don’t argue about using photographs in painting, or abstraction vs. figuration. They say they don’t jump through those hoops anymore. It’s the internet they argue about.

Georgia Sagri, 28, a visual artist recently arrived from Greece, says that digesting all the imagery of the digital world “produces a different narration. We are living with the illusion that we are connected, but we’re really not. I don’t *feel* connected. That’s why most of what we’re producing is style, instead of having something to say. In the past, a particular political situation produced a particular kind of art.”

Elizabeth Neel, 32, whose paintings suggest both de Kooning and Matisse, also wonders about the web. “But maybe everybody now shares this semi-disconnected access to the same political situation, the global village pseudo reality,” she says. “So maybe it’s not just an expression of style, maybe *that’s it*, that’s all we have!”

In an old army barracks made into artists’ studios at the College of Santa Fe, painter Katherine Lee, 22, wonders how her wired generation will look at art. “We read so many instant visual messages these days,” she says,

“like commercials—read it and get it. I think there *is* a fear of narrative, and it comes from the idea of ‘getting it.’ Narrative in anything can be read like a commercial, and I want a painting to be interesting longer than a commercial break.”

A mysterious, almost black landscape with a patch of distant light is pinned to the studio wall. It has the moody atmosphere and depth of a 19th century landscape by Corot or Courbet, but Lee painted it from a photograph with a unique mixture of graphite, oils, and cans of spray paint—the medium of fugitive graffiti artists. The dark foliage suggests a jungle or forest, and there’s something like a red umbrella in the midst of it all. But there are no people. “People are instantly narrative,” Lee says, “even just a hand or a face takes over a painting.”

It’s hard to know anything about the scene, and that’s what she wants: “That umbrella in the forest suggests *something* is going on. I like the idea that everything acts as potential content. I really don’t think about what it means when I’m making it, because I know it’s going to make it’s own meaning.

“People are so used to advertising that they want what they see in a painting to be pre-thought by someone else,” she says. “Otherwise, the idea of the artist as genius sort of slips away. But advertising does such a good job that maybe you just have to find a new strategy.”

Lee seems to be painting at a moment when painting is reinventing itself all over again. And she’s barely out of her teens.