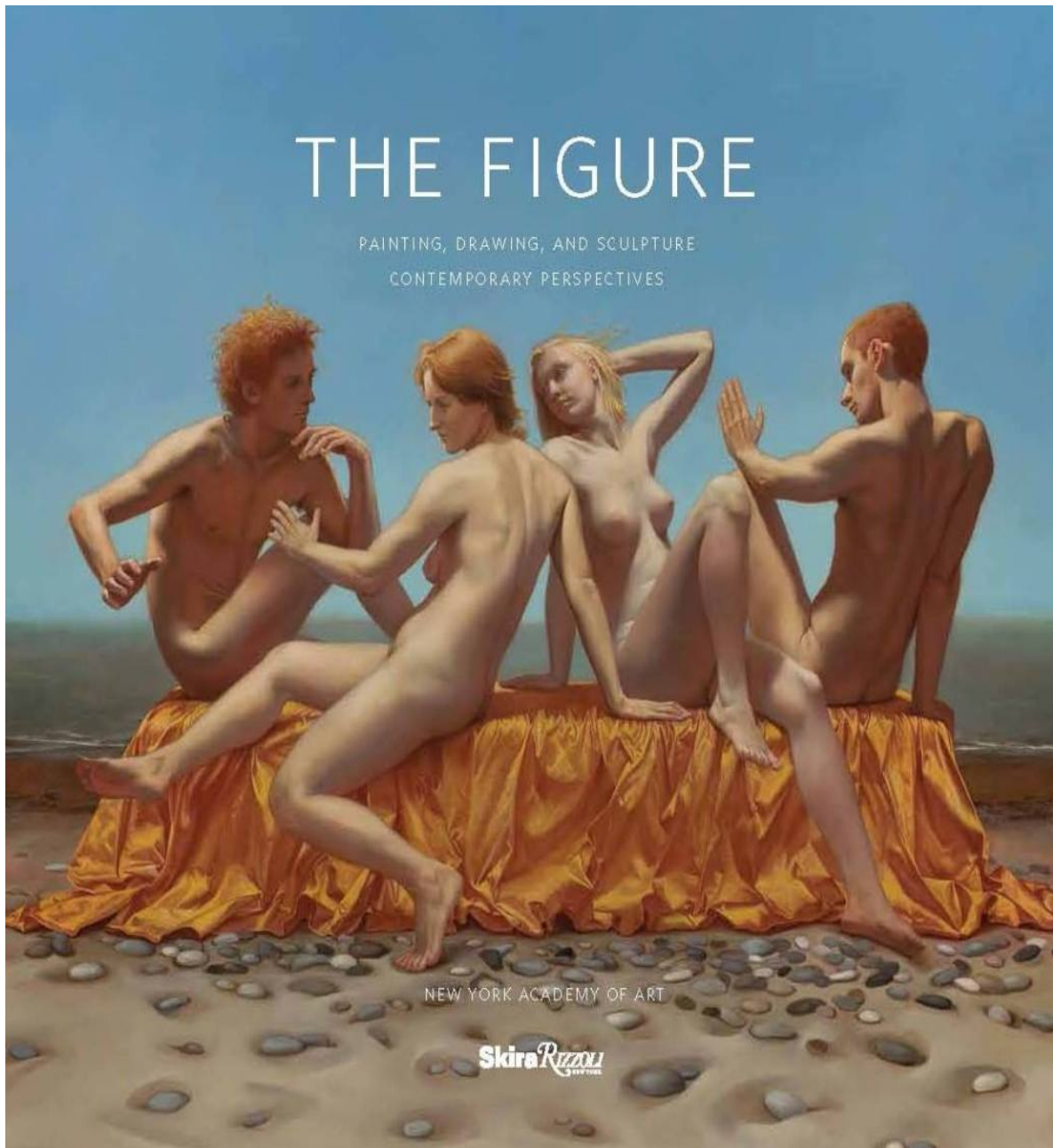


Contemporary Art's Body Language

by [John Seed](#) on September 30, 2014



The Figure: Painting Drawing and Sculpture, Contemporary Perspectives has the look of a high-end coffee table decoration, but don't judge this book just by its Martha Mayer Erlebacher cover. Inside, you will find it crammed not only with striking images but also with essays by critics, artists, and other thinkers that air out thematically related historical, philosophical, theoretical, and technical issues. *The Figure* is an ambitious and overdue tome that fills a void: if you haven't noticed, contemporary representation is coming on strong. It is also a celebration of the burgeoning influence of the New York Academy of Art (NYAA), a singular institution that has come into its own more than three decades after its establishment.



Will Cotton, “Fairy Floss” (2009), oil on linen, 83.25 x 56.25 inches (all images courtesy Rizzoli)

The NYAA held its first classes in a church rectory on Lafayette Street in the early 1980s — it was free, had no curriculum, and offered no degrees — and was the brainchild of plastics tycoon Stuart Pivar, firefighter Dennis Smith, and philanthropist Russell Wilkinson. After receiving a generous infusion of cash from the estate of Andy Warhol in the late 1980s, it then managed to survive a series of upheavals in the 1990s. Warhol, whose own late imagery was devoid of traces of the hand, still held the conviction that classical art training was a necessity for the next generation. Bob Colacello, writing in *The Figure*’s preface, asserts that Warhol “strongly believed in the necessity of a classical art education, though it was seen as hopelessly archaic by the then dominant Conceptual Art establishment, and generally unavailable at the country’s top art schools.” The NYAA, which evolved to offer the nation’s first graduate school of figurative art is now a thriving nonprofit cultural institution, which received its accreditation from the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) in May of 2013.

The Figure came about after Rizzoli broached the idea of a book to the NYAA; its President David Kratz then appointed artist and teacher Margaret McCann as the book’s project manager and editor. Because the NYAA favors techniques that are grounded in the development of technical skill, McCann realized that it was important to give the book a sequence that bridged the old and the new. As she points out in her introduction, the consideration of artist’s techniques over time necessitates discussion of “how the handcrafted and mechanical intersect.”



Edward Schmidt, "Conversation (Diana and Callisto)" (2003), oil on linen, 39 x 43 inches

As a result *The Figure* is divided into three main sections: Past Momentum, Present Reflections, and Future Continuum. McCann also made an effort to build the book's visual and written content by working with individuals who had some kind of connection to the NYAA: most of the writers and artists represented by images and/or texts have taught or lectured there. Each section consists of a group of featured essays interspersed with Artist Methodologies contributed by individual artists or artists writing in collaboration.

"Past Momentum" serves up five essays on painting and sculpture including Thomas Germano's "A Brief History of Traditional Painting Pedagogy." Germano opens with a discussion of Raphael's "School of Athens" — noting that its iconography celebrates teaching — and follows the lineage of Renaissance paintings towards later European art academies and mentioning Americans who studied there. Germano closes with the point that "... with the twenty-first century revival of figurative and representational painting, the perennial lesson of the school of Athens, that ancient pedagogical foundations and traditions of painting remain relevant and vital, is reaffirmed." I'm sure that Clement Greenberg would like to climb out of his grave and challenge that statement if he could, but Germano's assertion of the continuing relevance and vitality of the Western artistic tradition is at the heart of the NYAA's teaching philosophy.

"Present Reflections" is *The Figure's* most substantial section, containing eight essays and eight

methodologies. Margaret McCann's contribution, "Refiguring History Painting: Representation Meets Modern Techniques," is guardedly optimistic.



Jamie Adams, "Niagradown" (2013), oil on linen, 78 x 83 inches

"Painting will never have the power it had before the last two centuries' explosion of mass media and technology, but the culture wars of the Cold War-era painting that plagued American figure painters (at least) seem over, and Postmodern cynicism perhaps waning." McCann, who has a personal interest in the intersection of painting and photography, goes on to reflect that "... the mass-produced camera's mimetic power encroached on painting's historical pride, cultural identity and market."

Artist Kurt Kauper's contribution, "Representational Art and Kitsch," brings a cool head to a hot topic that has dogged contemporary representation, explaining, contextualizing, and ultimately reframing the range of kitsch:

"Kitsch still exists, to be sure: Wade Guyton's retrospective at the Whitney, with the artist's use of exhausted Warholian and Conceptual gestures masquerading as progressive, nicely fulfills Adorno's description of kitsch as 'serving up past formal entities as contemporary ...'" Kauper's essay and the images that accompany it constitute one of *The Figure's* most stimulating and

vital segments.



Margaret Bowland, "White Fives" (2012), oil on linen, 84 x 70 inches

In "Future Continuum," five more essays and five methodologies speculate on the future of representation, especially in relation to technology and social change. Laurie Hogan's "The Echo in the Picture: The Social Potential of Representational Painting," opens the section with a striking metaphor:

Like a tree striving in a harsh environment, painting as a set of historically informed activities has spread across the broad, rocky slope of markets, institutions, audiences and systems of delivery present in this stage of global capitalism.

Mark Mennin's essay, "Scale, Materials, and Self-Perception in Contemporary Figurative Sculpture," gracefully connects the ancient to the contemporary, concluding: "After the idea, material has always defined sculpture." Sculpture is well represented in *The Figure* — drawing, not so much — and Mennin's contribution includes images of 3-D works by Ann Hirsch, Will Kurtz, Nina Levy, Cynthia Eardley, and Rona Pondick.



Rona Pondick, "Dog" (1998–2001), yellow stainless steel, 28 x 16.5 x 32 inches

Pondick, in her artist's methodology, relates the technologically enhanced development of her "Dog," which she conceived as an "animal/human hybrid" connected backwards in time with the long tradition of mythological monsters. The size of its original life-cast head required revision, and in 1998 Pondick apparently crashed a lot of computers before obtaining the output she needed to render it in the appropriate scale. "I go to great lengths to make my hybrid sculptures feel effortless," she writes. "I am very comfortable using old and new technologies to accomplish this."

"Painting and Digital Technology: From Film to Photoshop," by Jean-Pierre Roy argues that "The perceptual world seems on another precipice of revelation," and the tools he surveys — Photoshop and 3-D animation and rendering softwares — are presented as having the potential to take art to the edge of that historical cliff.



Jerry Kearns, "One Trick Pony" (2013), acrylic on canvas, 72 x 92 inches

In the meantime, media imagery — including the pop surrealism of comics and animation — continues to seep into the imaginations of contemporary artists. "Day into night, birth to death, we are flooded with images," writes artist Jerry Kearns in his artist methodology. "Cartoon or photo, print or telecast, each type and form carries a great deal of information about the culture that created it. Standing in the flow, I work as an editor."

The situation Kearns describes hit a chord with me: in this age of informational glut we need editors more than ever before. Reading and glancing through *The Figure*, I found myself appreciating Margaret McCann's situation as the project manager of *The Figure* and also admiring her selfless scholarship. Working with a core image — the figure — McCann had to surf a tsunami of subjects, approaches, and methods to nominate strong work and weave together diverse threads of meaning without imposing any firm perimeters. Contemporary representation isn't and shouldn't be seen as a "movement." It may sound like something out of Monty Python, but I think of contemporary representational artists as an "autonomous collective" best left ungoverned by art historians.

After Postmodernism — a questionable -ism that has often masked imperfect pluralism — I doubt there will be any enduring global art movements in the future. I've heard a few things about contemporary representational art being connected to Metamodernism, Post-Postmodernism, and Post Contemporary but these self-conscious attempts to impose new -isms seem doomed to fail. Maybe what we have now, and should expect to have in the foreseeable future are circles of thought and nebulous clusters of related subject matter. Affinity groups of artists are forming via social media, and in these circles contemporary artists and their

followers are forming new groupings and constellations. The human figure is making appearances in more and more of these.



Nicola Verlato, "Mothers" (2005), oil on linen, 42 x 64 inches

As *The Figure* demonstrates, NYAA, with its insistence on skill and the necessity of understanding human anatomy, has become an inspired cultural force. In California, the Laguna College of Art and Design is also training a skilled and ambitious cadre of new contemporary representational artists. The network of theoretical and intellectual support for contemporary representation continues to coalesce, and the Atelier movement is growing fast. [The Representational Art Conference](#) (TRAC), which is sponsored by Cal Lutheran University, tripled in size between 2012 and 2014: a third event is planned for 2015.

The figure is the greatest subject of all — it will live as long as we do — and this stimulating book reminds us that even while a parade of postwar -isms distracted us, the human figure, with all its demands and complexities, was lurking in the wings, ready to re-emerge. If there ever was an art book that needed to become a major exhibition — or a maybe a salon — *The Figure* is it.

[The Figure: Painting Drawing and Sculpture, Contemporary Perspectives](#),

preface by David Kratz, edited by Margaret McCann, foreword by Bob Colacello, published by Skira/Rizzoli in collaboration with the New York Academy of Art.

Correction: Due to an editing error, an earlier version of this article mis-attributed authorship of "Scale, Materials, and Self-Perception in Contemporary Figurative Sculpture," an essay appearing in *The Figure*. It is by Mark Mennin, not Rona Pondick.

[David Kratz](#)[Jean-Pierre Roy](#)[Jerry Kearns](#)[Kurt Kauper](#)[Laurie Hogan](#)[Margaret McCann](#)[New York Academy of Art](#)[Rona Pondick](#)[Thomas Germano](#)