

The Museum of Modern Art

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RECENT FIGURATIVE PAINTINGS EXPLORED IN EXHIBITION AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

***Projects: John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton, Luc Tuymans
Through September 9, 1997***

The reemergence of figurative painting in the 1990s is the focus of The Museum of Modern Art's current *Projects* exhibition. On view until September 9, the works of John Currin (b. 1962), Elizabeth Peyton (b. 1965), and Luc Tuymans (b. 1958) are featured, with one room devoted to each artist. Recalling many realist traditions, ranging from nineteenth-century French Neoclassicism to postwar American regionalism, the paintings of these artists explore narrative and illusionistic realism. Like the realists of the 1980s, these three painters rarely work from life, preferring instead to use photographs, advertisements, film and video stills, and other media sources as models. Taken together, these works challenge the notions of the academic and the avant-garde and stand in opposition to the Neo-Conceptualist and Neo-Minimalist work of many artists of the same generation.

"Unlike their predecessors, these artists are less interested in painting's ability to tell the truth than in its ability to lie convincingly," remarks Laura Hoptman, Assistant Curator, Department of Drawings, who organized the exhibition. "The concern of these artists is in the meaningfulness of the act of painting itself as well as how it conveys meaning. Their choice of figuration at its most extreme—aestheticized Pop icons, tainted visions of femininity and masculinity, ghostly banalities—is a test of their passion for their medium."

The meticulously painted surfaces of John Currin's paintings, often individual images of fictitious women, purposefully clash with the pin-ups and ads that are his inspiration. In *Ann Charlotte*, a woman seductively parts her polyester jumpsuit, striking a chord of collective

memory but recalling a past that is too recent to have lost that embarrassing dated quality.

Although Currin's paintings may recall the crassness of debased tastes, his intended outcome is not one of cruelty but a sense of shared culpability, as in *Ms. Omni*, a portrait of an aging soldier of fashion, whose clothes, posture, and expression reveal her vulnerability to social concerns.

Elizabeth Peyton's portraits of such contemporary icons as Kurt Cobain are modeled on photographs from teen fan magazines but executed in the spirit of heroic portraiture. Peyton's fresh faced, sparkly-eyed rendering of Cobain, a musician known for his premature death by suicide, has the fervent idealization of an homage—an idealization not of Cobain himself but of his image as a tragic poet. *John Lydon*, a small full-length portrait of a wispy youth, hips thrust forward, shoulders slouched with the unmistakable air of a late-nineteenth-century dandy, is similarly romanticized. In her willfully idealized portraits of royalty, pop stars, and other artists, Peyton uses figuration as a vehicle through which she compounds the visual seduction already at play in her glittering colored surfaces.

Alternating between figuration and abstraction, Luc Tuymans's neutral representations of provocative, often horrific, subject matter disarm his viewers with his allusive style. The surprising impenetrability of *Window*, an opaque surface dappled with darker gray, is mirrored in *Diagnostic View IV*, an extreme close-up of a face, which despite its scrutinizing vantage point, belies its title by revealing nothing about its subject, a woman with breast cancer.

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