

ARTEMUNDI

WHEN FIGURATION STRIKES BACK

The more things change—the more they stay the same.

by Steven O'Hara



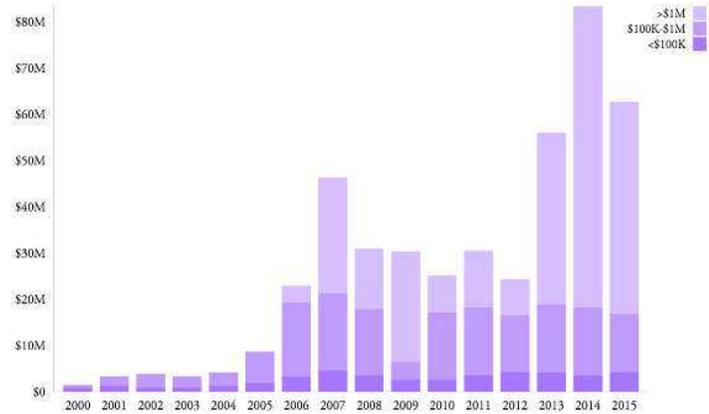
Lisa Yuskavage. *The Ones That Don't Want To: Kelly Marie*, (1992)

Throughout history, civilizations have left us with imagery, symbols and architectural sights documenting their existence and beliefs. Humanity's individual and collective cultural accomplishments have been either revered or rebuked by generations that followed. The 21st century has faithfully carried on this tradition in the most innovative ways. Though immensely popular for most of history, figurative art experienced a bit of a lull in the 20th century, while abstraction has recently dominated the market. Although it is ridiculous to say that figuration ever went anywhere, the reality is that art history is a series of dominant narratives, and there is no question that process-driven abstraction has been in the spotlight for the past few years, both curatorial and in terms of market. In recent years there appears to be a major shift back towards figurative art as young artists garner an increasing market attention and appearances in major exhibitions. A recent example of this game change was noticed as David Zirner's booth for Lisa Yuskavage was sold out during the VIP opening in Frieze New York 2016.¹

¹ Crocker, Lizzie and Teeman Tim. "Inside Frieze New York, the Mega-Rich's Art Supermarket." *The Daily Beast*. 5 May 2016. Web. 06 May 2016. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/05/05/inside-frieze-new-york-the-mega-rich-s-art-supermarket.html>

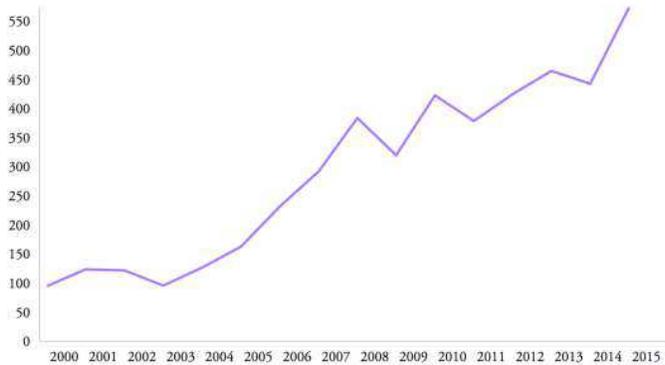
Whether we like it or not, the art market is the best place to identify the tendencies. A recent article in Artsy published a series of statistical analysis representing the dramatic increase of figurative painting sector in the art market. Throughout this financial study, selling results showed that the figurative art market has experienced a boom in the last decade. In the early 2000's, annual auction sales within their dataset were consistently below the \$10 million-dollar mark. Despite some fluctuation in values, the figurative art sector has consistently risen since 2006. Interestingly, the fluctuation in the market comes from big-ticket figurative paintings whose selling prices exceed the \$1 million USD.²

Figurative Painting Sales by Price Range per Year



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Number of Figurative Auction Lots per Year



© Artsy

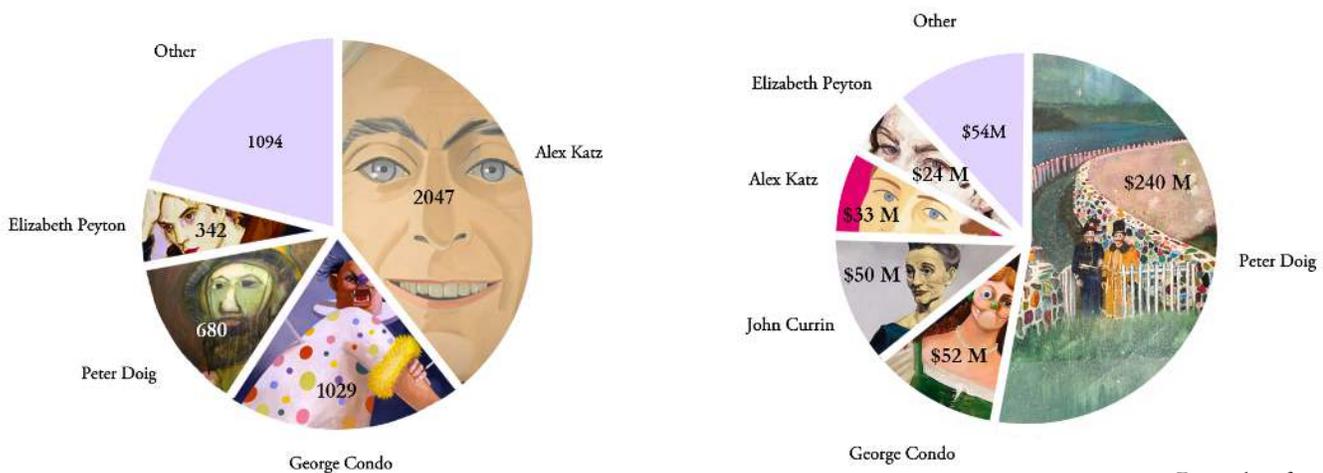
Over the last decade or so, the overall volume of contemporary figurative painting appearing at auction exploded, more than quintupling. Yet while the number of lots of figurative art has increased in terms of raw volume, there is no clear sign of a devaluation, suggesting that demand is at least on pace with supply. “The boom in both the number and value of figurative works appearing at auction jibes with increased interest on the primary market for works by figurative painters once again.”³

² Editorial, Artsy. "Figurative Painting's Market Boom, in 5 Charts." *Artsy*. 14 Mar. 2016. Web. 06 May 2016. <<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-figurative-painting-s-market-boom-in-5-charts>>.

³ *Ibidem*.

Zooming in on the overall sales figures to the number of auction lots per artist, Artsy’s analysis found that a few big names are dominating the contemporary figurative art auction block. Artist such as Alex Katz, George Condo, Peter Doig, and Elizabeth Peyton make up roughly 80% of contemporary figurative artists brought to market.

Number of Auction Lots per Artist, 2000-2015 Market Turnover for Figurative Painting, 2000-2015



Data taken from Artsy

It seems that this current change of taste is also affecting the institutional venues. A short while ago, The Tate announced the exhibition highlights of the 2017 program, in which five out of seven exhibitions will be showcasing the work of figurative artists.⁴ Piggybacking on a tendency picked up at MoMA PS1’s exhibition entitled *The Figure is Back*, there seems to be a curatorial interest moving beyond abstraction and focusing in figuration.

But, what has detonated this recently change in taste? Something has shifted in the art world recently, something so subtle that has almost gone unnoticed. Would abstract art be on its way out? This would seem perverse to anyone formed in the heyday of modern and contemporary art. “Make it new”, has always been the way of course for art history. Kathryn Hughes’ review in *The Guardian* about Alexandra Harris’ acclaimed book, *Romantic Moderns* (2010) declared: “The modernism we know about, or think we do,

⁴ Forest, Nicholas. "Tate Announces Highlights of 2017 Program." *Blouin Art Forum*. 17 Apr. 2016. Web. 6 May 2016. <<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1382576/tate-announces-highlights-of-2017-program>>.



was fierce and sharp-edged, all the better to scythe down the past and start all over again. During the interwar period, making things new became the mantra.”⁵ It seemed that Ezra Pound’s words were resonating throughout generations of artists on the mid-20th century. It is no coincidence that figures such as Duchamp, Miró, Mondrian, Rothko, coincided with a new wave of art museums and collections: the Museum of Modern Art, America’s premier museum devoted exclusively to modern art, and the first in Manhattan to exhibit European modernism, founded in 1929; the Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris, founded in 1937, the first museum of its kind created in Europe; and the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, which opened its rented quarters in Manhattan on East 54th Street in 1939, the first home to the Guggenheim collection. To resume, in Robert Hughes’ words: “the shock of the new”⁶ was here to stay.

But what happens when the shocking abstract and conceptual art becomes the rule? What is the new (excuse the redundancy) avant-garde? The answer might come from a Swiss art historian of the early 20th century. Wölfflin’s contribution to art history is well known as the first historian to describe a cyclic history of art. For him, art evolves in cycles, oscillations, waves or pendular swings. Despite the deeply criticized dogmatic focus of Wölfflin’s interpretation, his rational approach to understanding mankind’s reaction to art as emotional has remained. Following Wölfflin’s theory, further esthetic theorists, including Edmund Burke and Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller, described period changes in terms of a series of pendular swings between polar opposites. In the twentieth century, Martin Warnke proposed a model of pulsation in which every age of classicism will be followed by an age of anticlassicism. Finally, Ernst H. Gombrich utilized the dialectic of the classical with the nonclassical.⁷ Resuming this brief presentation of theorists, they all coincide that art’s revolutionary character counters itself against the directly previous institutionalized artistic movement as an aesthetic paradigm. This creates real problems, as truly avant-garde works of art need the tension created by opposing cultural values and institutions to sustain their meanings and put them in relief. When too many people come to embrace avant-garde works and styles, their intended purposes and meanings wilt and die quickly. So, could it be possible that we are finally getting over Duchamp’s *Fountain* after almost 100 years? Are we getting into an era of figurative backwards once again?

⁵ Herman, David. "The Rise and Fall of the Abstract Art Boom | Standpoint." *The Rise and Fall of the Abstract Art Boom | Standpoint*. Oct. 2015. Web. 06 May 2016. <<http://standpointmag.co.uk/features-october-14-rise-and-fall-abstract-art-boom-david-herman-tate>>.

⁶ Polya, Guideon. "Book Review: "The Shock Of The New" By Robert Hughes (1938-2012) – Modern Art, War & Society." *Countercurrents*. 24 Sept. 2012. Web. 06 May 2016. <<http://www.countercurrents.org/polya240912.htm>>.

⁷ Read more: Periodization of the Arts - What Is A Period? - Periods, Artworks, Baroque, and Qualities - JRank Articles <http://science.jrank.org/pages/10626/Periodization-Arts-What-Period.html#ixzz46IkfZo9B>

It might be unrealistic to say that we are returning back to the schools of thought which embrace the classical traditions of the human figure in sculpture and painting in the manner of Raphael Sanzio's Neo-platonic High Renaissance or Jacques Louis David's Neo-classical style. This senseless idea would be pointless -not by virtue of lack of talent-, but such artistic movements would not be visually or intellectually compelling or resonant on today's discrepancies and present schools of thought. Nevertheless, what might be happening is the development of a new series of hybrid tendencies inspired in formalism. An example of this artistic mutation could be "Zombie formalism". This pejorative term derives from the terms: (i) "Formalism" because this art involves a straightforward, reductive, essentialist method of making a painting; (ii) and "Zombie" because it brings back to life the discarded aesthetics of Clement Greenberg, the man who championed Jackson Pollock, Morris Louis, and Frank Stella's "black paintings," among other things.⁸



Zombie Formalism at Gagosian Gallery:
Harmony Korine's *Creol Teen Revolutions*, 2014.

Representational art is likely to stay with us, but its manifestations will not all be ones with which we are familiar. It is a different figure we are already seeing, one that has taken off and borrowed from abstraction, conceptualism, and new technology. The current interest in the figure has not just resulted from a marketing effort. Rather now we have done everything else, lets revive the figure. Nowadays, artists have found new ways of using familiar forms, often as elements in art that have little to do with those specific figures and more to do with larger ideas. Indeed, representational artists will continue adapting their form and content to the artistic and social movements of their historic moment, creating an art that is always modern even as it draws on tradition. There is a deep need for art that is authentic, engaged with the world and more about skill and knowledge than ego. Representation, which has been so restricted for the past decade, has vast untapped potential, and can be "progressive" in countless unexpected ways.

By Giovana Edid and Javier Lumberras

⁸ Robinson, Walter. "See Here: Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism ." *Artspace*. 3 Apr. 2014. Web. 06 May 2016. <http://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/see_here/the_rise_of_zombie_formalism-52184>.



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