



Beauty and the Body in Contemporary Art

As Is: Beauty and the Body in Contemporary Art

Friday August 26 - Friday, November 4, 2022
Grand Valley State University | Art Gallery

Many thanks to our lenders,
Michael McVickar and Brian Westphal



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Grand Valley State University Art Gallery

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As Is: Beauty and the Body in Contemporary Art

Our bodies are both personal objects and shared spaces. They allow us to physically experience the world and are also complex entities where concepts of beauty, self, gender, and identity intersect. Although there is a long history of artists engaging the human form, increasingly, contemporary artists have embraced the complexity and imperfection of the body as it is.

This exhibition, selected from a private collection in Chicago, brings together 19 artists from the last 25 years who actively engage the body and its changing role through their work. Drawing on historical and progressive approaches to figuration, they celebrate the body as a source of inspiration and challenge traditional notions of beauty and representation.

The images and renderings of bodies in this exhibition are not neutral. They reveal each artist's motifs, beliefs, and passions and raise questions about the representation of the human form in a world still saturated with idealized images of the body. More importantly, they provide meaning and help us see ourselves and how we see others within a culture that is increasingly conscious of age, race, gender, and status.

Engaging the Human Figure

Artists have always found the human figure to be a source of inspiration and engagement. The earliest depictions include those found in prehistoric cave paintings as well as carved or sculpted figurines. Portraiture, which typically includes the face and upper torso, flourished in ancient Egypt and developed as an art form to relay a subject's individuality, status, and unique features. Classical Greek artists emphasized muscular, athletic physiques to create an image of their culture's ideal body, while African artists from the same period elongated and distorted human features in their work to dramatic effect. During the Renaissance, self-portraiture and narrative works became increasingly popular, and by the seventeenth century rendering the nude figure had become a foundation skill for an artist to master.

During the early twentieth century, artists increasingly moved away from realistic depictions of the human figure toward abstraction. And in the latter half, instead of choosing other people as their subjects, they began using their own bodies as the principal medium and focus. Beginning in the 1960s, several female artists started to reclaim the body in conjunction with the fight for equal rights. They experimented with it as a site to create work and as a medium used in a performative fashion. Today artists still grapple with how to use the human figure in works of art and its connection to real bodies with imperfections and conflicts. Contemporary artists have provided a fresh and honest approach to the body, especially as we have seen an expanded understanding of gender and sexuality. Stylistically diverse, their work draws us closer as it celebrates the human form, engages in storytelling, and candidly approaches today's identity politics.

Collector's Statement

A very dear friend of ours, who is no longer with us, once said: "Sometimes you just need beauty." Those poignant words have influenced our lives and, in particular, have served as a guiding principle behind our collection.

We began our journey of collecting over 20 years ago and were initially drawn to realist work with a strong narrative and voice. That attraction was honed on figurative pieces which were relatable and accessible to us. With this focus, we came to realize that figuration can be both beautiful and disturbing; subtle and blatant; somber and ecstatic. These eclectic characteristics invite us, the viewer, to penetrate the personality of the image. And, while we enjoy an imaginary connection with each subject, we can also relish the tremendous skill and intense feeling that the artist puts into the production of their work.

The category of "figurative" has not been a limitation as we embrace a broad definition of the word. In addition to the human form, our collection also includes anthropomorphic items and "portraits" of various objects. Figures in our collected works may be rendered in realistic detail or nearly abstract compositions. The unifying element of all these works is that they offer moments of imaginative connection with the subjects.

'Collection' initially seemed a strange term for us as it suggested the accumulation of a commoditized asset akin to a stamp or coin collection. Today, however, we find ourselves able to say that we've built (and plan to keep building) a collection that brings us joy and enhances our lives. We are thrilled to have the opportunity to share it in this exhibition.

Michael McVickar & Brian Westphal

The Exhibition



Steven Assael (American, b. 1957)

Glory

1996

oil on panel

19.5" x 21.5"

Known as one of the most accomplished figurative artists of his generation, Steven Assael creates intimate, psychological portraits that seek to capture the distinctive personality and character of the sitter. Working only from live models, many of whom he meets in his New York neighborhood, Assael allows the subject's personality to help steer the direction of the work. He balances elements of naturalism and romanticism, fusing modern subject matter with a classical approach that evokes an Old Master style.

Assael is also incredibly focused on atmospheric lighting, using light and shadow throughout his compositions. *Glory* reflects Assael's attentiveness to lighting and his desire to reveal the humanness of his model. He sets the work in a casual, modern-day setting of a subway car. Cool lighting reflects on the cold metal of the car, while a warm glow emanates from the orange quarter that the model holds in their hand. Assael celebrates the complexity of the modern setting and the psychology of how people present themselves publicly.



Melissa Cooke Benson (American, b. 1982)

Fairy Tales End at Midnight

2010

graphite on paper

38" x 50"

"The You Know Me Better Than I Know Myself" series explores the repressed darkness and sexuality inside all of us. I employ props, costumes and theatrics in order to provoke the dormant aspects of my identity.

These drawings are inspired by emotionally charged memory flashes that have altered my outlook on relationships. The drawing process first serves as a cathartic experience, allowing me to reevaluate the effects of these events. Soon thereafter, the rehashing merely exaggerates emotions. Reality is increasingly skewed by imagination; fiction becomes truth. - Melissa Cooke Benson

Many of Melissa Cooke Benson's oversized drawings feature herself as the primary subject matter. Using photography and performance to create an idea and then a brush to dust thin layers of graphite onto paper for the final piece, Cooke Benson employs her body in the process of making. In doing so, she joins artists who, beginning in the 1960s experimented with their bodies as a site to create work and as a means to reclaim the female body. Through performance, she visualizes intimate and personal thoughts on her physical body, allowing it to be a complex and shared space that draws the viewer in.



Aleah Chapin (American, b. 1986)

Laugh

2012

oil on canvas

40" x 48"

The individuals I paint come from my life. They are my aunties, my cousins, my mother, my friends; old and new. They are mothers, writers, dancers, singers, entrepreneurs, musicians, photographers, activists, painters, sculptors, scientists, biologists, funeral directors, goat farmers, book keepers, jewelry designers, coders, doulas, landscape designers, astrologists, fashions designers, actors and filmmakers. They are all of these things and more. These incredible people have given me the gift of vulnerability. They have shared their hearts, souls and bodies so that I can translate what I see and feel through paint into something neither of us could have done alone. I am eternally grateful for all they have given me and continue to give.

- Aleah Chapin

Aleah Chapin's work, her portraits of family and friends in particular, openly explores the notion that our bodies are both personal and shared spaces. And increasingly, her work has expanded the conversation surrounding the representation of the body in relation to beauty, aging, and gender. *Laugh*, which includes four nude older women, depicts the moment when the group is attempting to contain a laugh. Hands are pressed over mouths, as the figures lean together in a shared moment of restrained laughter. Chapin draws the viewer into the intimate moment with an unknown narrative that drives questions about what was said to facilitate the laugh. And by presenting older subjects in a direct and accurate manner, she brings attention to western culture's representation of the body and the pursuit of an ideal body image.



William Fisk (Canadian, b. 1969)

Untitled #33 (Lighter)

2003

oil on canvas

35.75" x 29.25"

The objects depicted in the Portrait Series were purchased second hand, without any tangible reference to the previous owner. They are specific utilitarian objects — 35mm cameras, light bulbs, shoes, pay phones, trophies, furniture, and clothing — that have experienced undeterminable yet indisputable human contact. - William Fisk

Unlike most other artists in this exhibition, William Fisk explores the beauty and shape of inanimate objects instead of the human body. This painting presents a lighter, carefully lit and rendered. With a base, body, and head, the lighter compels the viewer to consider how its shape evokes the human figure. Drawn from his "Portrait Series," which includes other items such as cameras, light bulbs, phones, and other utilitarian objects, Fisk's photo-realistic paintings infuse new meaning into these objects. Paired with the other works in this exhibition that feature human figures, Fisk's work encourages the viewer to make connections between them and to consider how objects can take on personalities and symbolically serve as bodies.



Rose Freymuth-Frazier (American, b. 1977)

Transgression

2008

oil on linen

72" x 48"

Gender roles, sexuality and societal conditioning have all found their way into my paintings. Early training in theatre, where I studied Shakespeare and Greek Drama, gave me a template for a stylized and theatrical exploration of the human condition, which in my case is done from an American woman's perspective, through paint. I paint in oil because of its superior ability to represent flesh and blood. Through painstaking application my leading ladies, theatrically lit and often engaged in some sort of mini-drama, are brought to life. They tell a story that the viewer may recognize, or depict a point of view that may be new to them. - Rose Freymuth-Frazier

Trained in a classical figurative style, Rose Freymuth-Frazier informs the traditional approach in her work with a stylized, modern subject matter that explores strong female sexuality and vulnerability. In this work, her model radiates confidence and defiance, as she strides toward the viewer with one hand drawing up her dress to reveal her leg and the other hand thrust forward projecting her middle finger. Dressed in a luxurious fur coat open to expose her breast, the figure holds her head high and looks down at the viewer. This is not a subjugated woman. Instead of the traditional, reclined nude that invites the viewer to look upon them, Freymuth-Frazier creates a painting with a strong female figure asserting their gaze at the viewer. As the title of this work suggests, this painting is a transgression, an act of defiance against the traditional rules and roles for women.



Nick Gebhart (American, b. 1988)

Self Portrait

2015

oil on panel

18" x 18"

My main objective in every painting is to grab the viewer's attention immediately. I do this with contrast in value and an obscure point of view of my subject matter. Using people as my subject matter, I try to portray a certain feeling that relates to the composition. The people in my paintings are the focal point and the idea behind each concept. The viewer is invited into the figures' personal space; an invitation that seems uncomfortable, unknown, or unwelcome. Because of the immediate attraction to the painting, the viewer has a chance to get caught in the moment. Human interaction is just as important in my paintings as it is in real life. - Nick Gebhart

As part of the enduring practice of artists who turn to themselves as subject matter, Nick Gebhart places himself in front of the viewer with this self-portrait. Unlike much of traditional portraiture, which presents the subject in an ideal setting, Gebhart lights himself in a dramatic fashion, casting his eyes into shadow and only lighting parts of his face. He also crops out part of his forehead, focusing the viewer on his cloaked eyes, which stare out from the shadows. This creates an intense and confrontational viewing experience, as Gebhart's face projects outwards, while limiting the view of his eyes.



Anthony Goicolea (Cuban American, b. 1971)

Mike and Brian

2013

mounted c-print

30" x 30"

Anthony Goicolea is best known for his provocative photographic narratives, where he manipulates self-portraits into multiple roles in elaborately staged dramas. Goicolea also executes a variety of other media, including drawings, sculptures, and video installations that explore recurring themes of adolescence, identity, sexuality, alienation, and displacement.

In this work, a collaboration with art collectors Michael McVickar and Brian Westphal, we see allusions to Goicolea's staged photographic narratives. Dramatically placed in the water wearing suits and holding umbrellas, Goicolea presents a compelling and dream-like portrait of the couple that leads viewers to ponder the peculiar setting and circumstances.



Susan Hauptman (American, 1947-2015)

Self Portrait with Bow

2010

charcoal and mixed media on paper

36.5" x 20"

Executed meticulously and realistically, Susan Hauptman's self-portraits are often stark, unassuming, and expressionless. They reveal candid details of her physical self and call into question traditional representations of the female form. In these works, Hauptman typically presents herself looking directly at the viewer with her hair closely cropped, portraying an androgynous self that confronts cultural notions of beauty and identity.

In this *Self Portrait with Bow*, her ghostly face emerges from the dark background in unembellished detail. Self-assured, she confronts the viewer with her gaze, while the ghostly portrait of her husband Leonard floats below. His face, covered by a translucent pink bow, further emphasizes Hauptman's engagement with inverted gender roles and identity.



Amanda Elizabeth Joseph (American)
Soiled Teenage Girlfriend (She Wants It)

2011

oil on panel

24" x 18"

My recent work seeks to explore the intersection of class, race, and gender through the lens of "white trash," which can be best understood as a complex set of social representations. Placed within varying and often ambiguous backdrops, the female subjects of the works I create are accompanied by carefully chosen objects and articles of clothing that subtly speak to a codification of our bodies, our identities, and our environments based on our level of access. Each image begins by establishing an environment and choosing a model to occupy it, providing her with props and a role to play and then photographing the resulting mediation between fact and fiction. These images are informed both by research and by personal experience, culminating in portraits of young women that explore the intricately woven relationship between one's class, race, and gender in America. - Amanda Elizabeth Joseph

Amanda Elizabeth Joseph's *Soiled Teenage Girlfriend (She Wants It)* meets the viewer head-on, daring them to engage with the subject's provocative gesture that relays power, sexual deviancy, body ownership, and the complexity of societal standards. Using women as the protagonist in her works, Joseph creates paintings with engaging narratives in hyperrealist detail. This work, brash and sexually charged, confronts long-held notions of gender roles and society's commodification, idealization, and exploitation of the female body.



Alyssa Monks (American, b. 1977)

Nod

2009

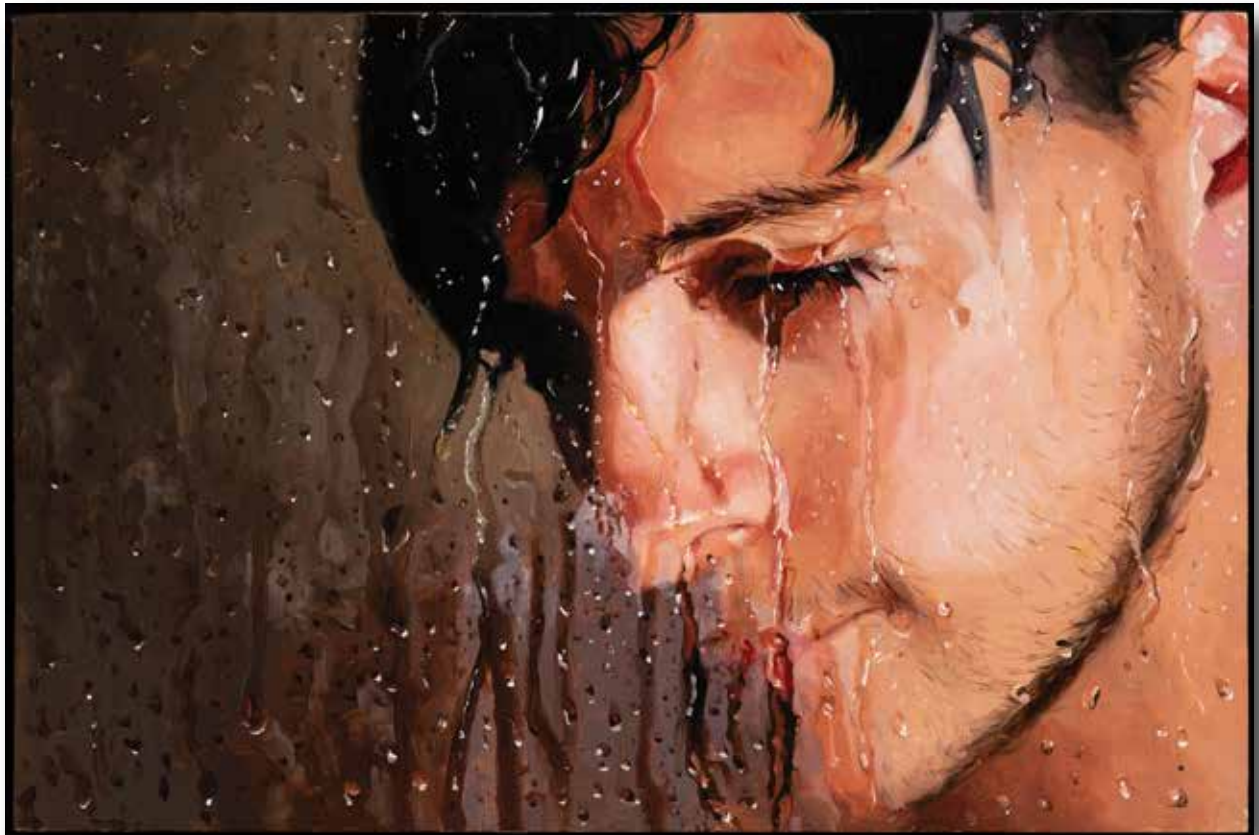
oil on panel

10" x 16"

My intention is to transfer the intimacy and vulnerability of my human experience into paint for someone else to connect to. Paintings are objects you need to be in the same room with to sense the energy in their surfaces. I like mine to be as intimate as possible, the painted surface like a fossil, recording every gesture and decision. -

Alyssa Monks

Using water, steam, and glass to filter and obscure her subjects, Alyssa Monks creates layered and intimate portraits of herself and others. In this work, Monk emphasizes the shape and contour of her subject's face, pressed against the glass of a shower. By tightly cropping his face and rendering the lines of water that run down the shallow spaces, Monk produces a composition that ebbs and flows between realism and abstraction. Furthermore, by painting the subject in a space and moment that most people commonly experience in private, she connects the viewer to the human experience and creates empathy in her work.



Darrel Morris (American, b. 1960)

Good Paper

2003

embroidery & applique

8" x 6.5"

Darrel Morris grew up on a family farm in rural Kentucky, a shy and undiagnosed dyslexic kid who loved art and learned how to braid rugs from his grandmother. His father, a coal miner and devout Baptist who valued traditional work, had a short temper that often found Morris as the target. Eventually, Morris earned his MFA at the Chicago School of the Art Institute and became fascinated with embroidery as a way to create autobiographical works of art. As a result, his pieces approach figuration and narrative through a unique medium that contains an emotional quality with both humorous and sad undertones.

In this work, Morris' father towers over a childhood version of himself dressed in a button-down shirt, tie, and maroon dress pants. With one arm raised, he yells at Morris with a speech bubble and condemns Morris to "Never use good paper to draw. Use the back of a calendar or the inside of an old envelope." Morris' childhood self, in the lower right, is rendered in an outline of thread as he recedes into the background while being reprimanded.



Clio Newton (American, b. 1989)

Jules

2019

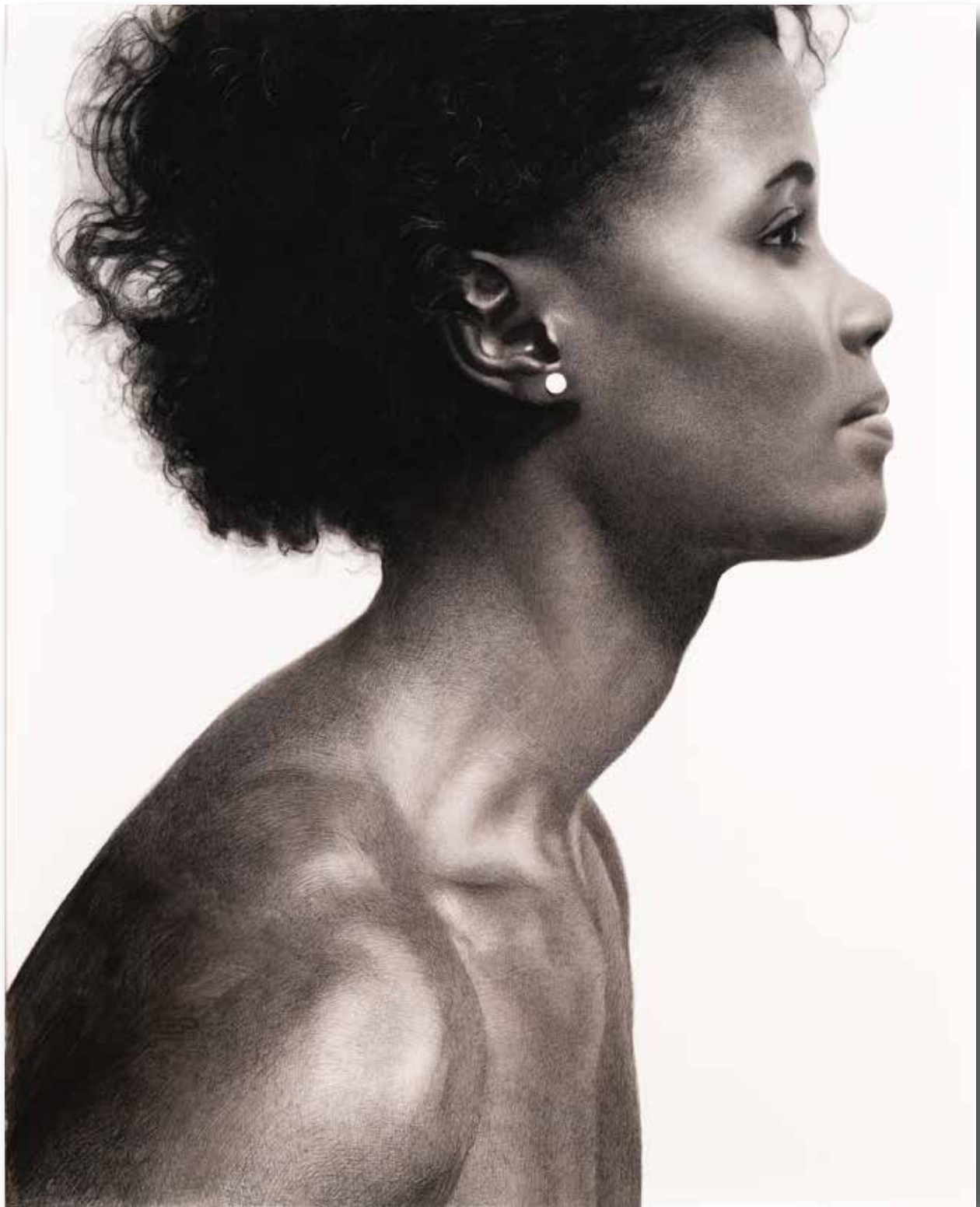
compressed charcoal on paper

66.5" x 53.5"

In my work I am currently developing gender composite portraits. These drawings are fictional; portraits of women naturally rendered into bodies of men. My intent is to create a naturalistic impression, using the same drawing technique in the face and the body, in hopes to blur otherwise incongruent male and female traits.

There is a long-standing tradition in classical figurative art of creating androgynous bodies. During the Renaissance, social controls over female modesty meant that it was inappropriate for women to model for artists. To get around this, artists often substituted male models for female models to create representations of women....

In my exploration of beauty and androgyny as idealism, I have intended to seek out specificity in my portraits. I am interested in a Renaissance aesthetic of masculine femininity without idealization. The specificity of a face, the idiosyncrasies of a body and the psychological world these details can suggest, act against a tradition of censorship. I hope to question what defines a body or a gender and what qualities make that body appealing, approachable, threatening or political. - Clio Newton



Nicolas V. Sanchez (American, b. 1983)

Book (The DR book)

2015

ballpoint pen on paper

37 pages (images 5, 8, 17, 23, 25, 28, 34, 35)

3.5" x 5.5"

I started drawing in ballpoint pen as a way to express the world around me. When you're taking in the world and all the experiences small and big, that's when you become curious about things. You start to develop inspiration. - Nicolas V. Sanchez

Nicolas V. Sanchez creates large, evocative oil paintings and intimate ballpoint pen sketches, finding his subject matter in the unassuming and the everyday. A child of Mexican immigrants, Sanchez's work also explores belonging, drawing on his bi-cultural experiences and upbringing in the Midwest.

His sketchbooks, often used to develop ideas, are also very personal collections of people and places he has encountered. Working in ballpoint pen he layers colors through crosshatching, creating portraits that form a record of his life and work. Sanchez also engages many of his subjects in profile without a background, giving these portraits a quiet stillness, while referencing silhouettes and historical approaches in portraiture.

This sketchbook contains over 30 individual portraits created by the artist during a residency in the Dominican Republic (Altos de Chavón Artist in Residence). These include students, class models, school administrators, teachers, and other artists. As a personal touch, Sanchez also included portraits of art collectors Michael and Brian, along with their two cats.



Aaron Smith (American, b. 1964)

Bent

2000

oil on panel

78" x 50"

Aaron Smith's portrait of a nude man pulling off his shirt emphasizes the curvature of the human body. Placed in a vulnerable position, with his face covered and arms twisted and pulling the shirt forward, the man stands in isolation. Smith also eliminates the primary focal point for viewing another human being by placing his subject in this awkward position without his face visible. Instead of engaging the subject's face, he focuses the viewer on the exposed shape of the man's body, emphasizing his muscles and genitalia, and accentuates the curve running from the man's leg, through his back, and into his upright arm. While Smith's figurative work allows the viewer to focus on the body's shape, it also places them in the position of the voyeur, catching this man in his moment of vulnerability.



Maria Tomasula (American, b. 1958)

Royalty

2008

oil on panel

32" x 36"

In contrast to the other artists in this exhibition whose work is primarily figurative, Maria Tomasula carefully creates still life arrangements that allude to the body, its meanings, and purpose. She works in a precise and meticulous method, producing images of extreme realism with metaphorical arrangements of objects from nature and elements from the body. Drawing on her Catholic upbringing, and European and Mexican traditions, Tomasula infuses her work with stunning colors and theatrical arrangements that reference beauty, life and death, and religion.

In this piece entitled *Royalty*, the viewer is confronted with a skull surrounded by a metaphorical crown of food. Made up of ripe fruit, seafood, and other enticing objects the crown radiates sensuality and energy, contrasting the austere skull staring back at the viewer with empty eye sockets. This creates a deep contrast in her work, referencing the duality of life and death, beauty and decay. Similar to a memento mori or vanitas work of art, Tomasula reminds viewers of the transience of life and the body's mortality.



Christian Vincent (American, b. 1966)

Thursday

1999

oil on canvas

40" x 55"

Christian Vincent is a figurative painter whose dream-like paintings explore conformity, desire, and isolation in social situations. His works are often filled with anonymous characters set in stark and solitary settings. The subjects tend to be youthful figures on the cusp of adulthood and cast in complex narratives with few visual cues.

This painting, titled *Thursday*, is from an early series of works where Vincent used Cuban sex workers as models. In the series, individual portraits are titled after the model's name, while group scenes, such as this one, are titled after a day in the week. Coupled with the stark background and their plain clothes, this adds a sense of monotony and despair associated with their work. In addition, by casting their eyes and much of their bodies in shadow, Vincent elevates the tension and sense of isolation these women experience.



Ruprecht von Kaufman (German, b. 1974)

S-80-II6-I2

2006

oil on canvas

80" x 116"

Direct and unnerving, this work by Ruprecht von Kaufman places the viewer in an uncomfortable position as they confront a group of densely packed and life-sized nude figures contained within a large canvas. Seemingly pressed against a glass wall, von Kaufman includes hints of reflections of clothed spectators that appear to join the viewer in watching the group. Part of a series he refers to as the "human zoo," the work compels viewers to ask questions related to the mysterious storyline that von Kaufman has created. The unknown draws the viewer in, but the unnatural and forced arrangement of bodies repulses them at the same time. In this unflattering presentation, with bodies squeezed together and flesh pressed against the glass, von Kaufman embraces the beauty, complexity, and imperfection of the body, while also leaving hints of a mysterious or perhaps troubling narrative at play.



Eric White (American, b. 1968)
Orgonomic Functionalism Conference, 1973
2004
oil on canvas
48" x 60"

I am fascinated with the idea that our reality is a dream and that something greater exists beyond our perception; that time is not linear and realities overlap. Whether it be physicist David Bohm's postulations that the universe is in essence a holographic projection, or Jane Roberts' channeled metaphysical works, like 'The Nature of Personal Reality,' which claim that everything we experience is self-generated illusion, these ideas are very compelling to me, and they are central to my work. Painting may not be the best way to tackle these concepts, but it's all I've got. - Eric White

Eric White's carefully executed paintings immerse the viewer in a surreal, dream-like setting. Drawing on twentieth-century film, music, and pop culture, White creates cinematic compositions with hints at the unknown. In *Orgonomic Functionalism Conference*, he produces a scene of an organization and event with every appearance of reality. White manipulates the scene, slightly distorting the features of his subjects and fading the background from the crisp foreground, creating anxiety and uncertainty about the true narrative at play.



Robin F. Williams (American, b. 1984)

Boy Between Balloons

2008

oil on canvas

48" x 48"

My work exists at the intersection of genre painting and portraiture. Most recently, my subjects are fictional women in unexpected or awkward poses. They provide the viewer with a dark but humorous version of their most culturally valuable attributes (sex appeal, youth, style, grace). In doing so, the figures expose the backhanded offer of limited power these traits promise to women. - Robin F. Williams

Drawing on social media channels, pop culture, advertising, and cinema, Robin F. Williams' figurative paintings explore pervasive American narratives about childhood, identity, and gender. She works in a variety of mediums, blending traditional brushwork alongside staining, airbrushing, pouring, and marbling of paint to create complexly constructed paintings.

Boy Between Balloons, a work she created early in her career, is part of a series where she explored the blooming sexuality of adolescence. This work also captures Williams' continued interest in the ways American culture informs the representation of men and women and the development of pre-assigned gender roles. In this whimsical piece, a young boy gazes off to the left with a blank expression, his head surrounded by two reflective balloons tied under his arms. These balloons, seemingly an ill-fated attempt to lift or adorn his body, add a sense of absurdity and mystery to the scene, perhaps hinting at the complexity and unknowns of adolescence.

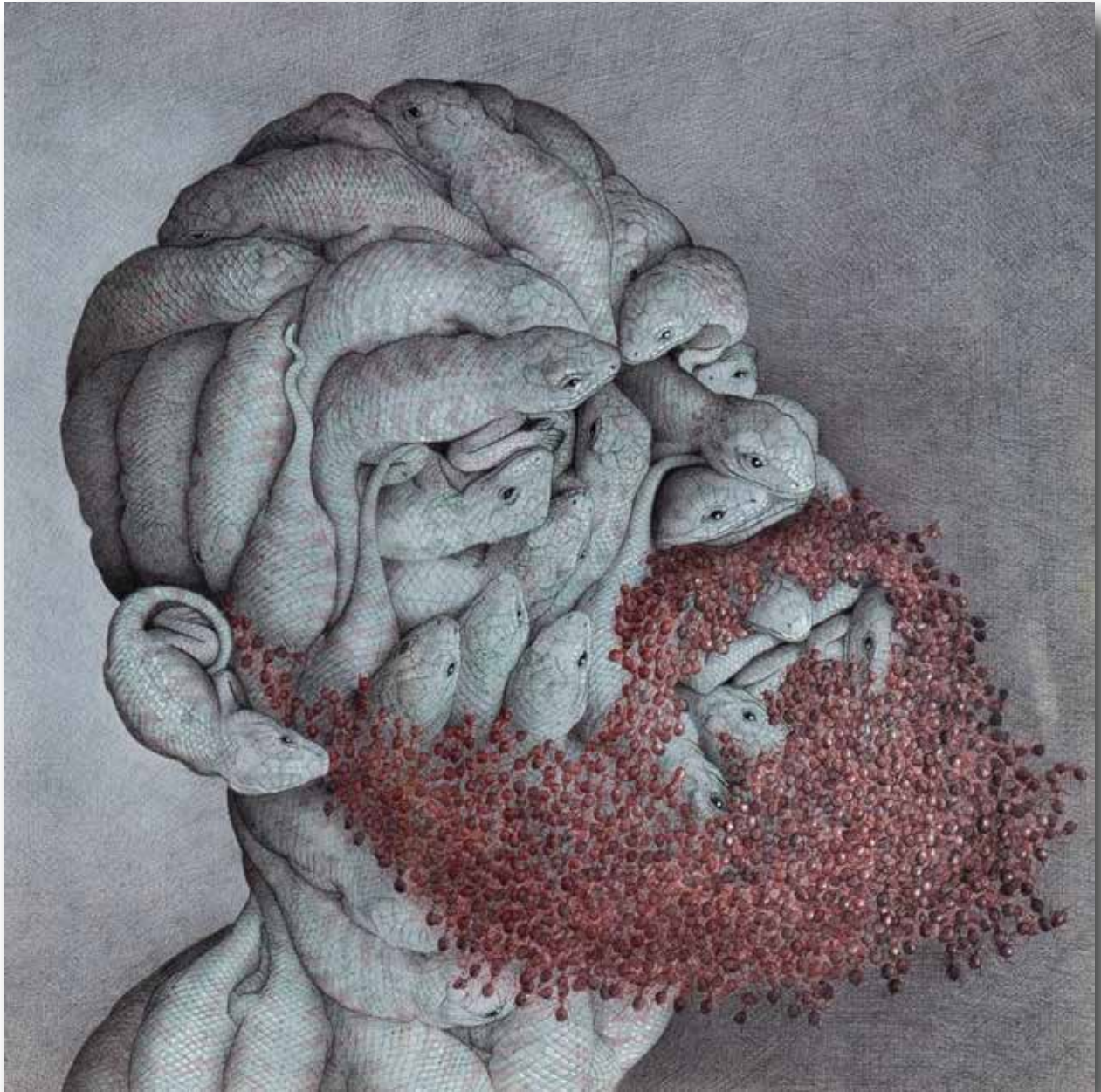


Zane York (American, b. 1978)
Self Portrait/Eastern Fence Lizards and Fire Ants
2017
ballpoint pen and gouache on paper
12" x 12"

I find animals and insects to be a great conduit for looking more closely at ourselves. Our relationships with creatures reflect quite purely our values, passions and fears. I see our relationships with animals as a distillation of ourselves. - Zane York

Incorporating insects, bugs, and animals into his intricate still lifes and portraits, Zane York creates fresh and insightful approaches to the human figure and the things that surround us. Drawing on a deep interest in the natural world, his work explores impermanence and mortality, and often borders on the surreal and symbolic.

In *Self Portrait/Eastern Fence Lizards and Fire Ants* York utilizes lizards as surrogates for his head and fire ants for his beard. Pulsing with energy and mystery, this representation of himself takes on a new organic complexity and ambiguity. Playful, mysterious, and reflective York's self-portrait emphasizes the shape and form of his face and hints at a symbolic connection to nature.





Our Vision

Grand Valley State University (GVSU) holds the second largest art collection in the state of Michigan and has activated its collection for learning and integration. Spanning throughout all GVSU campuses and incorporated into every university building, art is on public display providing unparalleled access.

The GVSU Art Gallery empowers our community to engage with visual narratives that align with university values through diverse exhibitions and a borderless museum across campus. We utilize digital initiatives and active learning opportunities to spark conversations, action, and reflection on core themes of social justice, human rights, and empathy that align with the university's philosophy of liberal arts education.

Belief Statement

We believe that art has the power to move people; to bridge gaps in understanding; to spark our collective imagination toward building a better, more equitable world; and to enrich learning experiences beyond the capacity of traditional classroom structures. In support of these outcomes, the Art Gallery acquires, preserves, interprets, exhibits, and makes accessible a diverse collection of art across all GVSU public spaces for the benefit of faculty, students, and community.

We seek to actively collaborate with community partners in the production of learning materials, experiences, and events, as well as the placement of art in public buildings. We support the interdisciplinary educational goals of the University and for the benefit of the community-at-large.

We believe that art matters because our shared humanity experiences and stories matter.