

KRISTINE STILES *and* PETER SELZ

THEORIES AND DOCUMENTS OF
CONTEMPORARY ART

A SOURCEBOOK OF ARTISTS' WRITINGS

SECOND EDITION, *Revised and Expanded*

By **KRISTINE STILES**

Dedicated to the memory of Herschel B. Chipp

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3 FIGURATION

Peter Selz and Kristine Stiles

Much of the writing on art following World War II equated modernism with abstraction and postulated an evolutionary progression that called for, in painting, ever greater reduction toward a flat surface of pure color relationships and, in sculpture, self-referentiality in terms of materials, size, surface, texture, and so on. But in art, as in literature, multiple strategies, methods, and approaches prevailed during this period, and in the work of a great many painters and sculptors the human image remained of central importance. The British sculptor Henry Moore expressed this position succinctly: "For me, sculpture remains based [on] and close to the human figure."¹ The American sculptor Leonard Baskin, using images from medieval and Renaissance prototypes, extolled the human form in almost prophetic language: "Our human frame, our gutted mansion, our enveloping sack of beef and ash is yet a glory. I hold the cracked mirror up to man."²

Belonging to an earlier, less disillusioned generation, the Cubist painter Fernand Léger (b. France, 1881–1955) was still, in 1945, imbued with faith in technology and hoped to establish a new, optimistic public art featuring the human body. Like Léger, Renato Guttuso (b. Italy, 1911–87) belonged to the Communist Party, which was less restrictive and more tolerant in Western Europe than in the Soviet Union, where strict adherence to Socialist Realism continued to be mandated.³ Guttuso, a member of the Italian senate and a vociferous spokesman for the left, discussed the problem of Socialist Realism for progressive artists living in countries where a socialist reality did not exist.

Max Beckmann (b. Germany, 1884–1950), in contrast, was an individualist who never allied himself with any art movement and tried to remain apolitical. He was, nevertheless, deeply affected by the political turmoil of his time. His belief that artists may be able to deal with the inner life of men and women and the human condition by means of metaphor anticipated the concerns of the next generation.

Like Beckmann, the German-born philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965) fled the Nazis and went on to teach in the United States. Tillich's liberal theology dealt with the place of religion in an era characterized by skepticism and materialism. His lifelong interest in the visual arts and his existential awareness of anxiety, despair, and courage in the face of the unknown were very close to the stance of artists of the

time. He summarized his position in the preface to the catalogue for *New Images of Man*, an exhibition of new figuration at New York's Museum of Modern Art: "Like the more abstract artists of the period, these images take the human situation, indeed the human predicament, rather than the formal structure, as their starting point. Existence rather than essence is of greatest concern to them."⁴

The ceaseless search for a meaningful human image by Alberto Giacometti (b. Switzerland, 1901–66) paralleled the existentialist investigations of his close friend, the French philosopher and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80). The existentialist "search for the absolute," together with awareness of the inevitable failure to attain it, had an indelible impact on both figurative and abstract artists of the era.

Coming from an essentially humanist tradition, André Malraux (b. France, 1901–76)—man of letters, novelist, archaeologist, adventurer, and eventual minister of cultural affairs for France—placed the work of Jean Fautrier (b. France, 1898–1964), especially his haunting series of abstract *Hostages* (1943–45), within a historical context of art expressing human suffering. Later, in 1951, Jean Dubuffet (b. France, 1901–85) pronounced his "anticultural positions" in a lecture given in Chicago, declaring his proximity to the forces of nature and to the irrational depths of the psyche and proclaiming the clairvoyant possibilities of painting. This lecture coincided with Dubuffet's completion of his *Corps de dames* (1950–51), a celebrated series of aggressive frontal nudes.

A member of the New York School (see chap. 1), Willem de Kooning (b. Netherlands, 1904–97) painted nonfigurative pictures for the greater part of his long career, but he came to feel that it would be absurd not to paint the figure. Picturing ferocious women with a loaded expressionist brush, he violently attacked traditional representations of the female figure. In London, at the same time, Francis Bacon (b. Ireland, 1909–92) painted violent crucifixions, screaming popes, entrapped male figures, and people in painful isolation and despair, all corresponding to the tragic personages in Samuel Beckett's plays. Between 1962 and 1979 Bacon gave seven interviews to the British art critic David Sylvester, which "may well have had as great an influence on painting during the last quarter of the present century as the critical writing of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot had on poetry of the 1920s and 1930s."⁵

In northern Europe, several rebellious and exuberant young artists with shared revolutionary attitudes organized the short-lived group CoBrA (1948–51), named for the three capital cities of their countries (Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam). The acronym was deliberately intended to evoke the aggressive, lethal snake. Opposed to the geometric abstraction that dominated contemporary museum exhibitions and gallery spaces, these artists created work rooted in Expressionism, Surrealism, ethnic and children's art, indigenous folk art, and the art of the insane. They believed in an art of the people and in collective action based on Marxist dialectics. Passionately devoted to freedom, they used spontaneous brushwork to create abstract images that nonetheless retained contact with mimetic sources. Over the years CoBrA's exhibitions and publications had a powerful resonance in Europe and beyond, and CoBrA artists Asger Jorn and Constant Nieuwenhuys eventually cofounded the Situationist International with Guy Debord and others (see chap. 8).

In 1948 CoBrA cofounder Constant Nieuwenhuys (b. Netherlands, 1920–2005) published his "Manifesto" in the journal *Reflex* (1948–49), a precursor to the influential

Cobra magazine (1949–51). Karel Appel (b. Netherlands, 1921–2006), another CoBrA cofounder, expressed a more impulsive approach to painting and overt political conviction, especially vivid in his painting *The Condemned* (1953), engendered by the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in New York in 1953. Willem Sandberg (b. Netherlands, 1897–1984), who directed Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum from 1945 to 1962 and transformed it into one of the most innovative modern museums in postwar Europe, indicated in a poetic statement a change of direction from the formal nonobjective balance of Piet Mondrian to the urgent vitality of the CoBrA artists, relating this to the later political events of 1968.

In West Germany after the war, figurative painting was associated primarily with Nazi art or with the Socialist Realist art then being propagated in East Germany, the USSR, and throughout the Eastern Bloc, as well as in China. Most of the work being done in the Federal Republic was abstract, *informel*, or *tachiste*, parallel to the predominant art forms of France and the United States. But younger German artists, from both West and East Germany, were also reviving earlier traditions, such as German Expressionism, and uniting the figure and gestural abstraction. Among them, Georg Baselitz (Hans-Georg Kern; b. Germany, 1938) occupied a position of preeminence. Baselitz arrived in West Berlin from East Germany in 1957 and four years later published the "Pandemonic Manifesto," in which he attacked the dominant Western mode of abstraction in provocative, aggressive language with an appropriate staccato rhythm. He later began to paint figures upside down, stimulating viewer astonishment and challenging conventional ways of viewing figuration to illustrate its abstract elements of form, color, texture, and so on.

Using a totally different approach to the human figure, Michelangelo Pistoletto (b. Italy, 1933) made trompe l'oeil configurations by attaching drawn and photographed images to polished metal surfaces that reflected the viewer, thereby fusing art and reflected life. Earlier, the Italian Futurists had wanted to put the viewer into the center of the picture, an aim in which Pistoletto succeeded. His flat Plexiglas mirrors become environments in which the viewer provides the third dimension. Pistoletto also did street performances, created installations, and made "minus objects"—unique objects that, having been made, negate any reason to make them again: hence one less object (minus) in the world.

Although British painters have been described as notoriously individualistic, in 1976 R. B. Kitaj (Ronald Brooks; 1932–2007), an American expatriate and long-time London resident, postulated the notion of a "School of London," characterized by a renewed interest in the human figure and comprising Francis Bacon and a number of younger painters: Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, Michael Andrews, David Hockney, and Kitaj himself. Kitaj had been a merchant seaman in his youth and studied art in his native Cleveland, as well as in New York, Vienna, and Oxford. His disjunctive and complex paintings evince his formidable knowledge of the histories of art, literature, and politics and of Jewish lore. Although he wanted to communicate an "art which is both good and more widely social" to a broad public, Kitaj was aware of the dilemma that "reducing complexity is a ruse."

David Hockney (b. U.K., 1937), a consummate draftsman, photographer, and designer of opera sets and costumes, as well as a painter, found his muse in Southern California, depicting the sunshine and swimming pools of Hollywood, its delights and deceptions,

and circles of gay intellectuals and artists. In 1964 he engaged in an informative conversation with Larry Rivers (b. U.S., 1923–2002)—one of the first New York painters of his generation to turn to the human figure and to attend to the vernacular as a source for irreverent, witty, and painterly works. The two artists debated the importance of communicating beauty as opposed to arousing interest through art.

Lucian Freud (1922–2011), the grandson of Sigmund Freud, was born in Berlin and immigrated with his immediate family to London in 1933. Freud's portraits and startling naked figures exemplify his search for truth in representation and the intensification of experience rather than the production of idealized nudes, as in painting in the European tradition of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Frans Hals. The result of Freud's uncompromising approach to painting is a figuration of a brutal, raw force and gripping psychological insight into the personality of the figure.

Romare Bearden (1911–88), born in North Carolina but raised in New York's Harlem district, was one of the first African American artists to be recognized as part of the American avant-garde. The subjects of his colorful collages largely draw on his early recollections and the rituals of black urban and rural life. In a 1968 interview with Henri Ghent, Bearden spoke about the place of the black artist and black community in American art history, as well as his unique methods of working.

Alice Neel (b. U.S., 1900–1984), closer in age to Giacometti and de Kooning, has been described as an "expressionist realist." Her corrosive portraits, which demonstrate her decisive insight into human character, became a model for younger artists turning to figuration. In the early 1960s, when painting the figure became more widely accepted, Philip Pearlstein (b. U.S., 1924), Alfred Leslie, and many others turned toward various modes of realism. Pearlstein's representations of nudes and studio models, set in compressed spaces, give the sense of an utterly detached, unemotional remove and neutrality on the part of both the painter and the sitter. Pearlstein rejected the Greenbergian notion of the "flat picture plane" and the "roving point-of-view" and proposed an essentially academic fidelity to visual appearance, causing the art historian Linda Nochlin to describe him as the *chef d'école* of a newly dawning realism.⁶

Indeed, on seeing an early daguerreotype, Paul Delaroche, the nineteenth-century French painter of historical subjects and portraits, is reputed to have exclaimed, "From today, painting is dead!" Ever since its emergence, photography has had an ambivalent relationship with painting: the camera's easy attainment of likenesses has threatened or even at times appeared to usurp the genre of portraiture. Rather than compete with photography, however, the "Photorealist" painters adapted painting to the photograph.

Chuck Close (b. U.S., 1940), trained in the Abstract Expressionist style, turned to figuration in the mid-1960s and eventually felt that the ready-made imagery of photography could provide models for his work as a painter. His "main objective," he explained, was "to translate photographic information into paint information." By this, Close meant that he wanted to explore the intersection between the technological eye—the vision of the camera—and the human eye. In his paintings of gigantic, hieratic portrait heads, carefully constructed on a grid system, Close confronts the viewer with a paradox: the camera-perfect likeness depends on a mosaic of painted marks that in themselves are abstract.

Richard Estes (b. U.S., 1932) has been identified as the paradigmatic Photorealist for his talent in conveying realistic, objective visual information that appears to eschew subjective interpretation. In his paintings, as in the novels of the French writer and filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet, the phenomenological significance of the object is stressed above human psychology—a technique, ironically, used in psychoanalysis to arrive at subjective meaning. Estes's urban landscapes may derive from photographs, but in their finished, painted form they demonstrate a geometric balance and spatial complexity. Many of his unpopulated cityscapes, with their multiple mirrored surfaces, deal with the visual and psychological information overload of contemporary society.

Photographically accurate reflections in eyeglasses frequently heighten the complexity of the figurative portraits of Barkley L. Hendricks (b. U.S., 1945). This device draws space and light from the outside world into the painting even as the painted subject returns the observer's gaze. Hendricks started working with a camera in 1966, later studying with the documentary photographer Walker Evans at Yale University, where he earned his BFA and MFA. In his paintings Hendricks began focusing primarily on the realistic representation of African Americans, conveying his subjects' independence, humor, eroticism, individualism, and strength of character through clothing, stance, and expression. For example, in his life-size *Brilliantly Endowed (Self-Portrait)* (1977), Hendricks presents himself wearing only a jaunty white leather newsboy cap, glasses, jewelry, socks, and running shoes. He chews a toothpick while gazing defiantly and with cool suspicion, his right thumb touching his penis as if to articulate and question the "hypersexualized black body that continues to be codified and consumed around the globe."⁷ Also a portrait painter, Kehinde Wiley, born in Los Angeles in 1977, has addressed similar themes in monumental pictures of contemporary African American subjects set against backgrounds of art historical motifs from various historical periods. For her part Elizabeth Peyton has painted portraits of white art-world and avant-garde celebrities such as Matthew Barney (see chap. 8).

A kind of photographic realism also distinguishes the paintings of Mark Tansey (b. U.S., 1949). The son of Richard G. Tansey, the editor of *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, and Luraine Tansey, the slide librarian who created the first Universal Slide Classification System in 1969, the artist grew up imbued with art historical imagery. In the later 1970s he began painting monochromatic works with paradoxical and enigmatic imagery, commenting on and analyzing historical, theoretical, and everyday subject matter to challenge philosophical and aesthetic concepts. Placing modernist certainty in opposition to postmodernist relativism, Tansey attended to the conceptual conditions and questions of representation in tandem with contemporary discourses on the nature and conditions of painting. Playfully drawing on Surrealist techniques of chance, Tansey invented his own version of a "color wheel" with rows of terms that, when spun, gave him subjects for new work. He also used the Belgian Surrealist painter René Magritte's eight categories for putting objects in conceptual "crisis" within an image: isolation, modification, hybridization, scale change, accidental encounters, double-image puns, paradox, and double viewpoints. In *Action Painting II* (1984), a group of artists work at their easels *en plein air*, under an American flag, painting the action of a rocket taking off in the background. Tansey thus commented elliptically on how Abstract Expres-

sionism was used to promote democracy by the U.S. government bent on the arms race and on creating technology for mutually assured destruction (or MAD).

Using figuration to make a political point, Leon Golub (b. U.S., 1922–2004) achieved acclaim in the early 1980s for his big, unstretched canvases of mercenaries and interrogators. In the immediate postwar period Golub had belonged to a group of young Chicago artists who shared a deep concern with creating an existential human image of thwarted but inexorable endurance. During the 1960s he had also been one of the few painters in the United States to take American aggression in Vietnam as his subject. In a 1981 interview Golub, a highly verbal and articulate artist, discussed the meaning of the violence and coercion, torture and domination, and, above all, uses of power he pictured in his works.

Also consistently committed to the human figure, Nancy Spero (b. U.S., 1926–2009), like her husband, Golub, belonged to the iconoclastic avant-garde Momentum group in Chicago before moving to New York. By the late 1950s Spero was incorporating texts into her drawings, which assumed unusual antihierarchical, horizontal formats (her *Codex Artaud* is 20 inches high by 25 feet wide). Spero frequently addressed feminist issues in series, as in the *Torture of Women* and *Notes in Time on Women*, or political issues in series like *Torture in Chile* and *To the Revolution*. Many of her works contain ferocious images of overt sexuality in which women are not just victims but also protagonists.

Arnulf Rainer (b. Austria, 1929) employed a very different strategy of distortion. Like Dubuffet, he was fascinated with the art of psychotics. He also shared an interest in the irrational with the Viennese post-Surrealist painters and was associated with the Viennese Actionists (chap. 8). In his *Face Farces* of the later 1960s and 1970s, Rainer used photographs to capture his own grimaces, gestures, and exaggerated mimicry, and then overpainted them to create graphic images that combined body art and painting. His works are descendants of the grotesque and wild physiognomic distortions by the eccentric Viennese sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, whose sculptures Rainer studied.

The figures in the sculpture of Magdalena Abakanowicz (b. Poland, 1930) are usually headless or faceless. With her early “abakans,” Abakanowicz helped to transform the ancient two-dimensional craft of weaving into the contemporary three-dimensional medium of fiber art. By 1980, when she represented Poland at the Venice Biennale, she was recognized as a major contemporary sculptor. Her works in fiber, and later in bronze, often consist of large groups of human figures that appear to be anonymous, androgynous, universal, and mysterious.

In 1982 the Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva gave the name *transavanguardia* to a group of Italian Neo-Expressionist artists interested in postmodern eclecticism, disjunctiveness, and nostalgic appropriation of past themes and styles. Among them were Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi, Mimmo Paladino, and Francesco Clemente. Whereas most of the Italian artists associated with Arte Povera in the late 1960s had broken with painting, the *transavanguardia* returned to the picture plane. Clemente (b. 1952), an artist of great versatility, has worked in acrylic, pastel, watercolor, tempera, woodcut, etching, and photography. His highly inventive works, which he has called “unknown ideograms,” resemble arcane allegories alluding to myth, dream, fantasy, and identity, particularly as many of these works are self-portraits.

In the United States, Susan Rothenberg (b. 1945) began her career making abstract paintings, before turning to equine imagery in expressionistically painted figurative abstractions. Her horses appear to emerge like phantoms from the gesso ground of her gestural works. Eventually, she introduced parts of the human body into her paintings, which are characterized by a rigorous formal structure and the ambiguity of their message. Rothenberg came to be associated with the “new image” painters, a term popularized by a 1978 show of figurative work at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

The boisterous, heroically scaled paintings of Julian Schnabel (b. U.S., 1951) gained instant notoriety in the late 1970s, when he peppered his pictures with discontinuous fragments of images, attached such objects as broken crockery and antlers to his surfaces, and sometimes painted on velvet or oriental rugs. By 1980 the thirty-one-year-old Texan was given a solo exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, followed by major shows in Paris, London, and New York. His paintings were hailed for their “return to emotion, imagination and meaning” by some critics and disparaged as “big macho art” by others. In a 1983 statement Schnabel reflected on the viewer’s relationship with the object, insisting that “there is altogether too much mediating going on” and that “the economic support structure and the artist’s dependence on it are constructed and inherited and not amenable to simplistic adjustment.” Schnabel has become an award-winning filmmaker while continuing to paint compelling works in the Abstract Expressionist tradition.

Using the tag “SAMO©,” short for “same ol’ shit,” Jean-Michel Basquiat (b. U.S., 1960–88) and his school friend Al Diaz began writing enigmatic phrases as graffiti throughout lower Manhattan in 1977. The next year, Basquiat dropped out of high school, but in 1980 his paintings gained broad attention when they appeared in *The Times Square Show*, organized by Collaborative Projects (Colab), a group of experimental artists working in performance, installation, video, and graffiti art. By 1983 Basquiat’s work was included in the Whitney Biennial, and he had become friends with Andy Warhol. He soon began to travel and exhibit internationally. Basquiat’s paintings, covered in graffiti-like writing, poetry, and personal iconography (such as the crown), draw upon Haitian, Puerto Rican, and African American heritage, his interest in jazz, and the exploitation of African American athletes in U.S. culture, among other things. They present raw visual truths evoking the psychic pain of racism, often represented by depictions of the black body as a skeleton, testifying to the young artist’s sense of emotional annihilation. Basquiat overdosed on heroin at the age of twenty-seven.

Almost a decade before Basquiat introduced graffiti into figurative painting, Philip Guston (1913–80), who was born in Canada but grew up in Los Angeles, shocked the art world by painting cartoonlike figures. Although Guston started out in the 1930s as a realist-expressionist painter, he turned to Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s and became known for his luminous, sensuous paintings. Explaining his subsequent return to figuration, he said: “When the 1960s came along, I was feeling split, schizophrenic. The war, what was happening in America, the brutality of the world. What kind of man I am, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going to my studio *to adjust a red to a blue*. I thought there must be some way I could do something about it.”⁸ Guston eventually found his way to a new subjective iconography infused with both anxiety and ferocity, painting a world peopled

with comic-book-like figures, often smoking and wearing Ku Klux Klan hoods, a world of living and dying in odd landscapes with strange fields of symbols.

Eric Fischl (b. U.S., 1948) has used figuration to show “the rift between what was experienced and what could not be said,” growing up in Long Island, “against a backdrop of alcoholism and a country club culture obsessed with image over content.”⁹ His revelatory encounter with the sexual vulgarity depicted by painters associated with the Chicago group the Hairy Who eventually encouraged Fischl to picture the sordid aspects and ethical contradictions of middle-class American culture. Fischl was also indebted to Max Beckmann in creating his bold portrayals of the sexual habits and taboos, as well as crisis of values, in suburban life. In the 1990s and 2000s, Fischl began painting haunting images from his travels in India, Italy, and elsewhere, as well as pictures of the bloated middle-aged frolicking on boats and beaches and in scenes of erotic enticement and fornication.

Jörg Immendorff (b. Germany, 1945–2007) also focused on contemporary society in his paintings, but rather than explore the values of suburban life, he questioned the politics of a divided Germany. In his most famous series, *Café Deutschland*, begun in 1978, he addressed the postwar German political situation and corruption on both sides of the former Berlin Wall. His frenetic compositions relate to the German Expressionist tradition and to Neo-Expressionist art strategies. Like Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater, with its *Verfremdungseffekt*, or distancing effect of estrangement and alienation, both Immendorff’s and Fischl’s paintings create a shock of recognition in the spectator without suggesting propagandistic solutions.

Perhaps the most directly political works of art created in the United States were the community murals that arose in the 1960s, originally in African American neighborhoods in Chicago and Spanish-speaking communities in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego. Telling the stories of the ethnic minorities that created them, the murals dealt with social and cultural issues and reached mass audiences within historically oppressed segments of American society. John Pitman Weber (b. U.S., 1942), who co-founded the Chicago Mural Group (later the Chicago Public Art Group) in 1970, coauthored the first book to describe in detail the history and actions of the community-based mural movement.¹⁰ Judy Baca founded the first mural program in Los Angeles in 1974. Two years later, she founded the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), a community arts center in Venice, California, that was instrumental in the creation of the *Great Wall of Los Angeles*. Designed by Baca and one of the largest murals in the world, the *Great Wall* portrays the history of California from prehistory to the present. In 1988 Tom Bradley, then mayor of Los Angeles, commissioned Baca to create the Neighborhood Pride Program, a project that employed disadvantaged youth in the creation of more than eighty murals throughout the city.

The influence of the country’s puritan heritage and new right-wing political activism led to disturbing infringements on free artistic expression in the United States in the late 1980s and 1990s. Andres Serrano (b. U.S., 1950), a Cuban American Catholic, was one of ten artists to win an Award in the Visual Arts from the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in 1988, a prize partly sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The resulting traveling exhibition of his work included the photograph *Piss Christ* (1987), which showed a plastic crucifix immersed in a golden fluid identified

as Serrano's urine. This image launched a national controversy when fundamentalist Christians objected to the work as blasphemous and criticized the NEA for spending tax dollars to support such art. Serrano defended his work in statements about his own Catholic heritage. He then went on to produce exquisite Cibachrome series of equally controversial subjects, from Ku Klux Klan members wearing Kelly green hoods to corpses in the morgue.

The controversy over government funding for the arts did not end with Serrano. In 1989 the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., canceled a posthumous retrospective of the work of the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (b. U.S., 1946–89), fearing public controversy and economic reprisals from the NEA. In addition to photographs of flowers, self-portraits, and portraits of celebrities, the Mapplethorpe retrospective included controversial images of interracial coupling, male frontal nudity, children in explicit poses, and sadomasochistic homoerotic images. Also in 1989 Senator Jesse Helms, a North Carolina Republican, introduced legislation that would have prohibited federal funds from supporting materials deemed "obscene or indecent." That same year President George H. W. Bush's Flag Protection Act proposed to make desecration of the American flag a federal crime in response to an installation by "Dread" Scott Tyler at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Helms's bill did not pass, and the Supreme Court overruled Bush's proposed amendment, but sentiments against the rights of free speech provided by the First Amendment continued to cause many instances of restrictive legislation, as well as self-censorship by artists that interfered with their willingness to depict the human body.

As these events were taking place in Washington, D.C., the painter and performance artist Sherman Fleming (b. U.S., 1953) wrote about racism in the U.S. capital. Fleming, who had desegregated every school and college he had attended, painted rebuses—puzzles combining figures, symbols, and words—that presented the emotional impact of the inflammatory racial slur "nigger." "It's hard to maintain stability; it's hard to maintain tradition; it's very hard to live," he explained. "So when I do pieces, I am concerned with history, a part of history that is always left out."¹¹ In his performances, Fleming has evinced the need generations of African Americans have felt to appear "impeccable at all times" and its exhausting effect. Yet his phallic RodForce persona of the mid-1970s also built upon the model established by the singer James Brown, anticipating subversive new forms of self-representation by African American artists.

The issue of racial prejudice has also informed the work of two white South African artists who grew up under the apartheid system: Marlene Dumas (b. 1953) and William Kentridge (b. 1955). Dumas left South Africa for the Netherlands at the age of twenty-three after studying at the University of Cape Town (1972–75). Life and death, race, and sex are the prevailing themes of her art, often presented in sexually graphic images that combine eroticism with the annihilation of the subject, the latter mirroring the dehumanization implicit in racism. Dumas's poetic writing is as gripping as the pathos of her painted images, which range from ghostly figures to a white child with paint-stained hands (one black and one red), signifying the blood-stained hand of racism, to depictions of madness and sexual abuse. Throughout, Dumas probes moral and ethical issues and questions of truth.

Kentridge's partly autobiographical drawings and animations comment on power

relations in South Africa, from the control of politics, industry, and resources to segregation and racial injustice. For his films, Kentridge draws charcoal images consecutively on the same sheet of paper, photographing each drawing before erasing it. Subsequent images bear traces of the erasures, creating a *pentimento* effect that metaphorically points to the hidden histories of racism—a technique the artist relates to “erosion, growth, [and] dilapidation that . . . seeks to blot out events.” Kentridge, who studied mime and theater as well as politics, African studies, and fine arts, cofounded the Junction Avenue Theatre Company, a racially integrated company dedicated to the theater of resistance, in 1975 and the film cooperative Free Filmmakers in 1988, both in Johannesburg. In 1997 he collaborated with Jane Taylor on the play *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, using Alfred Jarry’s farce *Ubu Roi*, in which the crude Ubu character represents “a policeman for whom torture, murder, sex and food are all variations of a single gross appetite.”¹² The play, which toured internationally, included testimony from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s hearings and combined performance by live actors, puppetry, music, animation, and documentary footage.

The paintings of Luc Tuymans (b. Belgium, 1958) obliquely refer to colonialism (especially in the Belgian Congo), fascism and the Holocaust, and sexual abuse, as well as other inexplicable and disturbing experiences. Drawing on photographic and filmic techniques—he worked for three years as a filmmaker, studied art and art history, and then returned to painting—Tuymans has employed cropping, framing, sequencing, and close-ups to achieve hauntingly intense images of figures set in indistinguishable environments. His muted colors and foggy, unclear lines reinforce the unsettling effect of the vague content of his images.

Whereas Tuymans’s “awareness of art history has led him to suggest the impossibility of originality,”¹³ Shahzia Sikander (b. Pakistan, 1969) has created a new style by studying and rethinking miniature painting, a historical genre especially associated with the Middle East, India, and medieval Europe. Sikander earned a BFA from the National College of Arts in Lahore in 1992 and an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1995. She painstakingly renders figures, fauna and flora, architecture, and lush patterns and borders, using both conventional perspectival space and the ancient form of stacked perspective. Presenting contemporary imagery in what some consider an anachronistic, stylized genre of painting, Sikander comments on both contemporary history and methods of representation.

In stark contrast to Sikander’s small-format, highly detailed approach, Jenny Saville (b. U.K., 1970) has created monumental depictions of distorted and overweight women, painted in broad brushstrokes with sweeping gestures. Saville’s figures, which sometimes appear like flayed animal carcasses, have been compared to Francis Bacon’s and Lucian Freud’s grotesque representations, as well as to the voluptuous flesh visualized by Peter Paul Rubens. Interested in the alteration of the human form, Saville has pictured transgender bodies as well as ones changed by cosmetic surgery, deformity, and disease.

A 1993 self-portrait by Catherine Opie (b. U.S., 1961) shows the artist with an armband tattooed on her right bicep and a childlike drawing cut into and bleeding on her back: two stick figures in skirts holding hands in front of a house with a storm cloud overhead. A social documentary photographer, not unlike Nan Goldin, Opie has specialized in depicting those marginalized by their sexuality and their related gender

politics. Opie's work includes portraits of her friends in the Los Angeles S/M performance community, life-size Polaroid tributes to the gay, HIV-positive performance artist Ron Athey, and ordinary scenes of lesbian couples at home across the United States. In other series, Opie has photographed football players, surfers, freeways, malls, homes, and Wall Street, visualizing the social and built environments that contribute to the formation of identity.

Wangechi Mutu (b. Kenya, 1972) has also been concerned with the construction and reception of identity, using painting and collage techniques to produce elegant but distorted images of the black female body: mottled, scaly, full of lesions, and covered in feathers and ribbons, with grotesque yet alluring erotic and exotic features such as heads that stretch into octopus tentacles. Her figures are sexualized and racialized sites of colonial violence and voyeurism, presented in a context of postcolonial hybridity and with a feminist critique of gender, race, and class. Mutu's writing displays similar disjunctive traits, as she approaches narrative as she does her collages, installations, and performances: with dissociative descriptions of traumatic situations and incidents. Although educated in the United States, with a BFA from Cooper Union and an MFA from Yale University, her art remains grounded in the African Diasporic experience.

Distortion also characterizes the "Superflat" paintings, sculptures, films, and commercial objects produced by Takashi Murakami (b. Japan, 1962), who inspired a generation of artists in the 1990s and 2000s. Fascinated with *otaku* culture (Japanese *anime* [animation], *manga* [comic books], and video games), Murakami abandoned his intensive study of Nihonga (a style of Japanese painting dating from the late-nineteenth-century Meiji period) and turned to popular cultural forms. His work is especially associated with Japanese "cute" culture (figures like Hello Kitty) and cartoon figures derived from Poku culture (a term derived from "Pop" and "*otaku*"). Critiquing the dominance of Western cultural trends, and evoking the consequences of the atomic bomb with the nomenclature "Superflat," Murakami has declared that Japan "may be the future of the world. . . . From social mores to art and culture, everything is super two-dimensional."

From the perspective of M. F. Husain (Maqbool Fida Hussain, b. India, 1915–2011), the Muslim figurative and abstract painter and filmmaker known as the "Picasso of India," the world is anything but flat. In 2006 Husain began work on three major projects: the "history of Indian civilization from Mohenjodaro to Manmohan Singh," the "history of other civilizations dating back to Babylon," and "100 years of Indian cinema." After a career of over seventy years, which included fleeing to Qatar when his nude, erotic depictions of Hindu gods and goddesses were violently rejected by radical Hindu fundamentalist groups as blasphemous and his life threatened, Husain accepted Qatar citizenship in 2010, at the age of ninety-five, stating: "The dream is to go on as long as you are alive. . . . Whether my paintings are done in New York [or] Qatar, only the title has changed, nothing else. In my small way, I have told my own story, which I hope will remain [in] the hearts of millions of my countrymen."¹⁴

LUC TUYMANS Disenchantment (1991)

The small gap between the explanation of a picture and a picture itself provides the only possible perspective on painting. My comments refer only to its ambiguity. Behind some pictures there are ten other paintings from different years. I can't project myself completely into the picture; if I did that I wouldn't be detached enough to paint it. Explanations come later. Thinking and feeling and working out feelings are different elements, each with a rhetoric of its own. A memory-free zone arises between conception and execution.

The Loss of Painting

The model of the painting *Our New Quarters* was a photograph of the courtyard of Theresienstadt, beneath which a prisoner had written 'Our New Quarters.' . . . Anyone who enters the painting is imprisoned behind the writing. The picture and the sentence are two pictures that go against one another. They do not support one another. The picture destroys the word and the word destroys the picture. The destruction is projected into the picture, although we do not see the destruction. The new thing in the phrase 'Our New Quarters' was actually false hope. The picture is impossible, as one cannot deal with it as an individual. There is an idea of memory that is neither personal nor collective; it's just a picture of memory, a non-picture. The work develops an idea of loss and an idea of beauty. Beauty exists only as a perversion. It is calming. This is complete failure, complete terror. But it's also the right dimension. One does not win, one is not powerful, but the power of depicting something produces nothing but helplessness. . . .

SHAHZIA SIKANDER Nemesis: A Dialogue with Ian Berry (2004)

IAN BERRY: Even though your work [with miniature painting] was a confrontational break with an expected form, it was received with great success in Pakistan, and it has had a lasting impact on artists there.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER: Yes, I received a great deal of success in 1991–92 before I decided to come to the United States. I was the first to create visibility for the genre locally as well as internationally later on. Pakistan in the 1980s was very restrictive and in that context, the National College of Arts was a haven for free thinking and expression. It was a great place to be amidst the rest of Lahore and Zia's military regime. Military presence has a way of prevailing, and either you respond in ways that are reactive or that become subversive. It is only with distance that my responses have become clear—I was barely 17 at that time. The conventional approaches in the painting department pushed me towards miniature painting because no one else was interested in it. Its social context was so intriguing. It supposedly represented our heritage to us, yet we reacted to it with suspicion and ridicule.

* Luc Tuymans, excerpts from "Disenchantment" (1991), in *Luc Tuymans* (Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1992), 11–36; translated by Shaun Whiteside; reprinted in *Luc Tuymans* (London: Phaidon Press, 2003), 112–43. © Luc Tuymans; courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp, and David Zwirner Gallery, New York.

** Ian Berry, excerpts from "Nemesis: A Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander," in *Opener 6: Shahzia Sikander: Nemesis* (Saratoga Springs, NY: Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College, 2004); online at <http://www.shahziasikander.com/essay01.html>. By permission of the interviewer and the artist. © 2004 Ian Berry.

I had grown up thinking of it as kitsch. My limited exposure was primarily through work produced for tourist consumption.

I found, and still find, the presentation and documentation of miniature painting to be very problematic. In fact, by its very nature the term miniature is laden with issues of imperialism, and is usually followed by a very descriptive, almost ethnographic definition. At this time I also started to explore language in relation to the formal symbols of mathematics and logic. This is a big part of my most recent drawing series: *51 Ways of Looking*. All this started to resonate with post-culturist theories, and I used that new information towards deconstructing the miniature. . . .

The question that came to mind was always about the discourse outside the canon. What is cultural imperialism? What is essentialism? What was the representation of the other? Could representation exist outside of the binary oppositions? What could be the third space, the in-between space? I was intrigued by the concept of role reversal, especially the distance that it could afford me as an artist. Finding myself immersed in the early 1990s politics of identity, I started experimenting with the semiotic nature of various symbols that could question stereotypes of certain feminine representations, such as hairstyle, and costume as in the sari, shalwar kameez, and chador. I began to see my identity as being fluid, something in flux. . . .

Most of the readings of my work focused on cultural definitions rather than the work itself. I became the spectacle in many reviews—it didn't help to have exaggerated information like making my own brushes, pigments, and paper floating around. I can clarify something here once and for all—I don't make my brushes or my pigments! I make my ideas and I try to express them in as many ways as possible. At that time I was driven by sharing as much as possible, perhaps in an attempt to shrink gaps of knowledge. But filling in the gaps doesn't necessarily change the assumptions people already are bringing to the equation.

IB: Did you make any work at this time that spoke directly about identity?

ss: I made a few works that specifically addressed the notion of identity as being fluid and unfixed, primarily in response to the rigid categories I found my work and myself being placed in or put in. Identity became theatrical, malleable through conditions such as production, location, duration, conventions of staging, reception of audience, the construction of the audience as well as the substance of the performance itself, including body language, gesture, etc. In one I dressed in braids and aggressive clothing and mapped my movements around an airport, observing how people react when there is a visual encounter that looks familiar and is not. In another, I wore a costume that disguised my body thus made me transparent at times. The work got read as a plea for liberation for women who are subjected to wearing veils. I am amazed even now how limited people's understanding is. Pakistan is not Iran and Iran is not Lebanon and Lebanon is not Saudi Arabia. My being from a so-called "Muslim" country often became my primary categorization. Unfortunately it still persists. . . .

I often see myself as a cultural anthropologist. I find open-ended encounters and narratives compelling and perhaps seek to express that more than anything else. Symbols, icons, and images are not automatically about one thing or one way of reading. A crucial reading for me has been the underlying exploration of beauty. The average response to my work usually includes 'beautiful.' For me, issues of aesthetics are always in flux in context to the genre of miniature. Its transformation from thing like kitsch to beautiful, low to high, craft to art,

regional to international, artisan to artist, group to individual. These are interesting ideas for me. I am always exploring questions such as: does beauty move towards formalism? Is beauty trivial? When does it become perverse? . . .

JENNY SAVILLE Interview with Simon Schama (2005)

JENNY SAVILLE: I'd wanted to do a large carcass for so many years after seeing Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* and the Soutine carcasses. I saw two of them at The Royal Academy in London a couple of years ago. There was light emanating from the paint—the color jumped right out at you. There are these romantic stories of him pouring fresh blood over the meat. . . .

I had in my head this image of a traditional open-ribbed carcass that I wanted to paint, but when I walked through the gap in the slaughterhouse door with daylight coming in, I encountered this steaming beast that was half on the floor and half hanging on great meat hooks. It was half flesh/body and half carcass, the flesh was incredibly creamy with a taut twist to its torso. It was, like, spitting paint at me. . . .

I learned a lot from observing plastic surgery and looking at medical books and specimens. The paintings like *Ruben's Flap* and *Hyphen* with grafted flesh sections resulted from looking at these things. When you see the inside of the body, the half-inch thickness of flesh, there's a realization that it's a tangible substance, so paint mixed a flesh color suddenly became a kind of human paste. . . .

I try and think about the identity of the paint—how I could get this substance to read as, for example, sweaty flesh. I use a lot more oil now because it gives the paint movement. . . .

The influence of watching surgeons at work helped enormously with that. To see a surgeon's hand inside a body moving flesh around, you see a lot of damage and adjustment to the boundary of the body. It helped me think about paint as matter. I mix a lot of my paint in pots, in large quantities of various colors rather than just mixing off the palette as I work. You consider the cooler tones of a thigh compared to a hotter tone on the hands more—I try and think in terms of liquid flesh and light. . . .

When I'm doing one piece I could end up with three hundred pots, but I start with some core tones and work off from that and I shift the tones as I'm working by adding purer color. Depends how complicated the painting becomes and what's needed. . . .

I want to use paint in a sculptural way—I want it on the surface. I like that famous de Kooning quote, "Flesh was the reason oil paint was invented." Look at a Velázquez nude; he gets this incredible transparency of flesh with zinc white. You feel the body, the porcelain flesh. . . .

I try to find bodies that manifest in their flesh something of our contemporary age. I'm drawn to bodies that emanate a sort of state of in-betweenness: a hermaphrodite, a transvestite, a carcass, a half-alive/half-dead head. I don't paint portraits in a traditional sense at all. If they are portraits, they are portraits of an idea or a sensation. I've really felt this when I've worked from images of heads from forensic science books. The process of painting them is a sort of discovery of the landscape of their face. There's no personality as such, I never met

* Simon Schama, excerpts from "Interview with Jenny Saville," in *Jenny Saville* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 124–29. Used with permission from the interviewer and Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.