



N E W P A I N T E R L Y
F I G U R A T I O N

I N T H E
B A Y A R E A

Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever... Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life: and this is the key to it all.

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, chapter 1

Plunging into this confluence of five artists' *New Painterly Figuration in the Bay Area*, one surfaces first on all the images of water. "Water water everywhere/Nor any drop to drink" comes immediately to mind as both a whimsically appropriate subtitle for this selection of contemporary figuration and as absolutely insufficient. Meditation on the five artists' painterly — or waterly — works reveals their desires to confront — and quench — expressive thirsts, and their discovery of powerful metaphors that they and observers can "drink in."

The stream of water through these paintings could be simply explained by the fact that large bodies of water — the Pacific Ocean, the San Francisco Bay, San Pablo Bay, and Sacramento River Delta — pervade the local environment. Four of the five artists live in the East Bay, their proximity to the water accentuated by the necessity of crossing over it to visit their or other San Francisco galleries, or to enjoy any other offerings of the City. This incidence of aqueous imagery may reflect the artists' affinities with their natural surroundings, or it may be purely coincidental, a fluke of available paintings or an unconscious proclivity of the curator. For several of the artists the depiction of water is definitely a recurring motif, but it is not water itself that is indigenous to post-war Bay Area painting, but what its use suggests: an introspective demeanor, manifested in an emotional and often autobiographical directness. And it is not water *per se* that is the icon of this imagery, but the human figure. The body is the primary vehicle for visualizing deep conflicted feelings; its postures and movements signal those of the mind. Its prominence in Bay Area art emphasizes the especially permeable boundaries there between artists' lives and artistic imagery.

Yet the catalysis of figure and water makes a rich milieu, as water itself is a particularly malleable container for emotional projection, and an arche-typal symbol with resonant implications. The universal nature of water is its amor-phousness and mutability; these aspects also suggest primeval qualities. A body of water can connote the pre-cosmic condition of non-being, before Creation; a primordial chaos; the organic source of evolutionary life, the sea; or the amniotic fluid and a pre-birth sensation of intimate bonding with one's universe, and thus with maternity itself. As a "fluid body," water can also be interpreted as a symbol of the flux of the unconscious, of regressive urges, or of intuitive wisdom. Being formless, it also lends itself to a loosely expressionistic rendering, the unifying "painterly" style of the works in this exhibition.

Pat Klein's *The Floater*, (cover), epitomizes the aquatic prevalence by locating a splashing figure in the middle of an expansive whirlpool. The centered composition focuses on the frothy androgynous, whose bundled choppy white strokes against the smoothly blended swathes of rich blue and black evoke a phantom of tense energy against an undulating sea. This simple structure conveys the kinesthetic mixture of terror and pleasure of finding oneself isolated amidst a vortex, struggling to remain afloat yet alternatively giving in to the current and going with the flow. It suggests an uneasy attempt at "oceanic consciousness," which Sigmund Freud described as "a feeling...of being one with the external world as a whole" and whose prototype is the sense of bonding and limitlessness engendered by an infant nursing at the breast, in a position of primary narcissism (*Civilization and Its Discontents*, pp. 65, 68). Klein's motif strikingly encapsulates an ambivalence between desire for and distrust of connection with an enveloping environment, with one's unconscious, or with obliterating the boundaries between self and other — fundamental attitudes germane to adult life.

The sharp hues and pared designs of Klein's scenes exude the intensity of nightmares. At a quieter reserve, Christopher Brown's water images convey their emotional force filtered through a more benign moodiness. Their muted tonalities, textural softness, and enigmatic juxtapositions of elements evoke an atmosphere of dream-scapes. Both Klein and Brown more frequently locate their figures in landscapes than seascapes; Brown has especially focused on dark forests in subtly brushed organic hues. Here a vaguely articulated nude female, draped and bunched in white, seems to have emerged from the translucent aqua *Lake* toward a shadowy grove. It could be a mirage of a white goddess of the lake, but beyond that it is a contemplation of forms of the receptive, maternal, feminine principal: the water, earth, woman. In *Water Dream*, it is broad male heads that protrude above water, or in *Wood, Water, Rock* float over it, transparent compared to the suavely modelled rocks (of ages?) and outshone by the radiance of reflected light. The lyrical grace of Brown's clear coloration and brushwork almost distracts one from the desires these paintings invoke for submersion in the *mater materia*, a return to a primal state — a kind of baptism with its sense of death and annihilation on one hand, and rebirth and regeneration on the other.

The literal act of going near the water is directly referred to in the classical subject of *The Bather* by Richard Overstreet, and water itself is depicted in his *Three Elements*. But the experience of immersion — of eradicating the separation between self and milieu — Overstreet elicits most strongly in his *Gardener's Lesson*, with its barely perceptible figure almost a coagulation of feathery strokes. Leaning backward, slightly swaying onto heels, the apparition might be being rained on, pelted, or blown by golden streams until it's blurring into dissolution. Equally, the mass of faint force-lines seem to be radiating from within in a state of cosmic interpenetrability. The posture is one of simultaneous supplication and release, in which one is absorbing and being absorbed by the atmosphere in a state of integrative enlightenment.

Among these artists, Oliver Jackson experiments most radically with a synthesis of figuration and abstraction. The loosely gestural scrawls and blotches resemble a childlike uninhibitedness with painting, and the demeanor of play radiates from both its free painterliness and schematic renderings. There are no references to water *per se* among his images, but allusions to its qualities: a sense of splashing around in the forces of the Id, drawing upon fleeting images from memories, dreams, cinematic or real-life dramas that swirl around in one's head, and floating the fragments

throughout oceanic chaos. Again, a sense of immersion is evoked, here within the interior environment of self-consciousness, with its reappearing fragments of ghosts, spirits, alter egos and "other" voices. Jackson takes the tumult of an inner life, one's dreams or unconscious, as his obsession — constantly playing with the tensions of psychic disintegration yet maintaining control. In his 1983 *Untitled*, for instance, the clear volumetric depiction of the male figure located in the middle suggests a solidly centered self anchoring the flux.

Marie Thibeault is distinctive in this exhibition for her focus on social interaction. Sometimes inspired by actual life-world events, her scenes have been generalized into painterly abstractions where the figures emerge from layered streams of color and paint. Discovering the postures through an "action painting" technique of unpremeditated strokes of buttery pigment, Thibeault likewise deploys the figures' gestures themselves as the chief vehicles of emotion rather than the facial expressions. The most literal reference here to the force of water is in her *After the Flood*, with the destructive power of a deluge facilitating examination of interpersonal relations during social crisis as manifested in the figures' body language. As in the poignant cry for help in *The Call*, vivid colors and heavy strokes radiate the passionate intensity of distress. Both titles allude to Old Testament themes of redemption. More directly, individual figures act as embodiments of emotion, the huddled groups in gnarled strokes against the fluid, looser background suggesting the social altruism of collective solidarity against the disintegrative forces of the world.

You cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.

Heraclitus

New Painterly Figuration in the Bay Area brings together five artists who, without constituting a school or group, are continuing a stylistic tradition considered to be a regional characteristic. It was initially identified by the exhibition *Contemporary Bay Area Figurative Painting* organized 31 years ago and presented at the Oakland Art Museum in September 1957. Through the show, Bay Area figuration became the first nationally recognized local style, and one that remains strongly associated with the region. Writing in the exhibition catalogue, curator Paul Mills summarized the work of a dozen participating artists (including David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, James Weeks, and Paul Wonner) by stating

They continue the bold methods of handling paint which are a mark of abstract expressionism around here, but instead of being applied on shapes that come only from the mind or brush, these methods are applied to shapes which come from either real or imagined scenes... [Secondly,] whatever these paintings may have in common, the different, individual personalities of the painters remain the stronger factor. (p.5)

These assertions can be maintained for the contemporary five under discussion. Mills' preceding sentence, however, is just as relevant: "In my opinion, these new paintings differ importantly from other, earlier figurative paintings."

The same could have also been said about a more recent survey of local figuration, *The Impolite Figure*, which highlighted some of these differences. In the catalogue statement accompanying this eclectic assemblage (on view during the summer of 1983 at Bannam Place Exhibition Space and Southern Exposure Gallery, both in San Francisco), organizer and painter Mark van Proyen articulated one emphasis as artists "using the figure as an emblem of the self, existing in an ambiguous environment." Furthermore, he noted one "common concern," shared by all of the artists was that "Although depiction is a primary concern it tends toward schematic rather than descriptive portrayals of subject. And finally, all of the work here seems animated by an authentic need to communicate *something* to that 'larger audience' that we all know is there."

Those particular aspects also characterize the imagery in this latest of the infrequent examinations of the Bay Area's on-going figurative painting. By choosing to center on the "painterly" element among current figuration (over the graphic, realistic, or narrative), curator Mark Johnson has also accentuated what that dynamic brushwork facilitates: the expressionistic, the emotionally-charged, and the fantastic. The "bold methods of handling paint" Mills spoke of are here used more in the service of the imagination than of clearly rendering scenes observed and remembered. Echoing Mills, I believe that "...these new paintings differ importantly from earlier figurative paintings" by the active inspiration these artists take from their fantasies, fears and dreams. Within a range of significant distinctions between them, and in the greater realm of post-war contemporary art, their images are generally less adventuresome stylistically than psychically. This exemplifies the organic relationship between artist and art that Thomas Albright emphasized throughout his *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area* as characteristic of the region, where form is an outgrowth of content, rather than vice versa.

But a pure regionalism is no longer possible — if indeed it was even 31 years ago — due to the assimilative pressure of cosmopolitanism. These artists have also been influenced in varying ways by the "fresh waters" of the fervor of Neo-Expressionism, an adaptation in turn of early 20th C. German figurative expressionism which over the past decade (and until very recently) came to dominate the American and European art scene. Its international prevalence emphasizes the fact that Bay Area Figuration (itself typically more "expressionistic" than "classic," within that historical stylistic polarity) is no longer merely a provincial style, although as this exhibition demonstrates it displays regional proclivities.

Beyond examining specific artists, this exhibition is important as art history, as an admittedly belated update of the contemporary flow of a regional current. Its aim to survey a stream of recent figuration extends understanding of its cultural milieu, and in turn contributes to the course of Bay Area art, whether it is figurative, painterly, oceanic, or not.

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