



FIGURATION TODAY

The Surrealist Influence

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Traditional Surrealism, still influential among contemporary artists, is considered to have occurred in two forms. The first was visual automatism, a complete spontaneity of uninhibited expression, and the second was illusionistic surrealism, in which more precision was used. The six artists in this exhibition, Billy Colbert, Ian Jehle, Jenny Laden, Gowri Savoor, David Fox and Lorene Taurerewa, working almost a century after the invention of surrealism, incorporate elements from both surrealist movements but also evince distinct differences in technique, intent and media.

Like the traditional surrealists, the artists presented in *Figuration Today* employ unexpected juxtapositions, absurd logic and a concern for and an aim to affect human experience on a personal, cultural, social, and political level. Utilizing imagery of the human form is one of the most direct ways to achieve this. The traditional surrealists knew this and many of its members often used figurative imagery to express the Freudian theory of the unconscious. Regardless of anti-figuration sentiments in modernism and postmodernism, the human form is still crucial to contemporary art.

A key difference between traditional and contemporary surrealism is that artists today disregard hierarchies of media and technique. Traditional surrealists worked on canvas and used drawings primarily as studies. Today drawing occupies a central place in the contemporary art scene. The noted art critic Robert Hughes remarked that, "drawing

never dies ... because ... the desire for an active, investigative, manually vivid relation with the things we see ... is apparently immortal."

The 2-D work presented in *Figuration Today* emphasizes restricted color, clarity and reduced means. Atmospheric backgrounds typical in Salvador Dali and Yves Tanguy's paintings are not a necessary element in contemporary work. Spatial realism in traditional surrealism was slightly flattened and abstracted, especially when compared to classical fine art. Today artists feel complete liberty to incorporate literal realism or to flatten and abstract space as they see fit.

The first example of a "ready-made" was Marcel Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel (1913) which consisted of a bicycle wheel attached upside-down on a wooden stool. André Breton's famous essay, "The Surrealist Manifesto" would come eleven years later causing a massive cultural and artistic revolution. Artists today also use found objects or "ready-mades" without hesitation, knowing it to be an established fine art practice. Often found objects are combined with motors, sound, new digital technologies and even traditional media.

Gowri Savoor's hybrid creatures appear as if they have been fashioned from the earth. Though her figures are connected to the world and particularly to nature, they are often isolated, incommunicable, displaced and vulnerable. They reside in, and we are witness to, a strange, unfolding narrative. Her view of the interconnectedness of man and nature is distinctly romantic. Though her figures,

like Taurerewa's and Laden's, are not direct self-portraits, they are indeed autobiographical representations.

Ian Jehle's portrait work is also concerned with the individual. His delicate, ephemeral, apparition-like, yet plainly realistic portraits give a sense of the spiritual in the mundane. The mundane and the spiritual worlds collide within the portraits with an eerie dissonance but undeniable presence of both. Re-created from a series of photographs shot by him, these literally larger-than-life renditions of actual people ask if the exterior of a person can accurately portray an individual and if so, to what extent.

Jenny Laden, a neo-feminist, questions the interplay and struggle between power and beauty, how the latter can both negate and attract the former. Laden's work incorporates appropriation of neo-classical portraiture in the 19th century, Art Nouveau (the turn of the 20th century) and modern and contemporary cartoon and illustration. Appropriation, a practice not developed until the 1980s, is derivative of the found object method that first appeared in the dada and surrealist period. Like Savoor's, Laden's figures are inextricably bound to nature. The hair on her figures cascade upwards, morphing into dreamlands and cityscapes as the eyes peer languid and listless into space.

Billy Colbert's untitled hanging sculpture, comprised of found historical "ready-mades," old dry-cleaning tickets and fishing boots evoke the horrific white supremacist practice of lynching African Americans and images of water not found. Scholars, Water Ras Michael Brown and

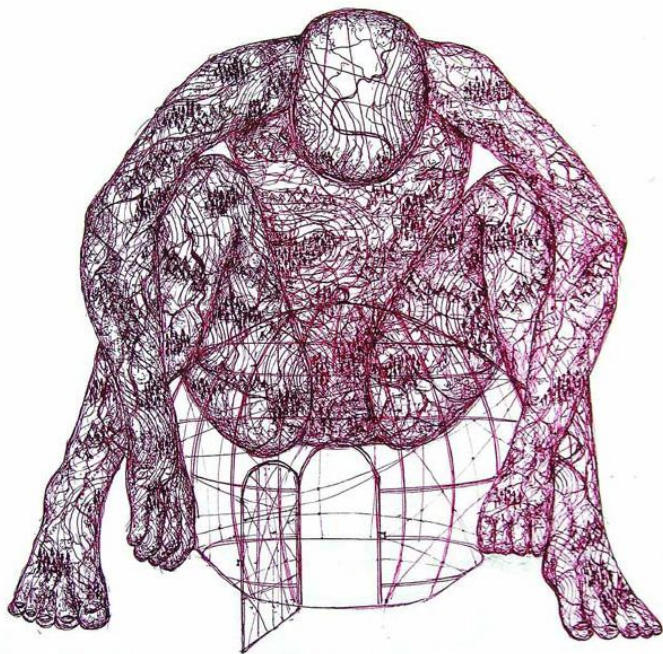
T.J. Desch-Obi reveal that water was a central feature in the spiritual practices of Africans on both sides of the Atlantic, that it referenced the connection between the living with the dead.

David Fox's work truly embodies the revolutionary spirit that André Breton intended for the surrealist movement. As an activist artist, Fox literally draws out his outrage towards those who are corrupt and abuse power: "The Opportunists" show men besieged by a swarm of enraged and frantic insects. The latter appear as if they are of one mind, seeking retribution against man's environmental crimes. Where Savoor's and Laden's figures are at peace with nature, Fox sees humanity as a direct threat to it.

Lorene Taurerewa's work contains poignant and dramatic surreal shifts in scale and like Savoor's employs hybrid figurations of animal and man. Otherworldly female figures, though withdrawn, are distinctly powerful and perfectly comfortable with this power. Her work addresses tensions of the individual in society through a cinematic sensibility and peculiar narratives that cause the viewer to feel at once apprehensive and curious.

While themes addressing politics, the individual, society and nature are not new, unique sub-themes have arisen with the passing of time. With the progression of aesthetic sensibilities, the invention of new media, and the reevaluation of surrealist traditions, the manner in which these concerns are addressed by contemporary artists differs from the approach of their historical counterparts.

Rula Jones,
November 18, 2010



GOWRI SAVOOR

Gowri Savor is a visual artist and designer, working in environmental sculpture and creating works on paper. Born in Manchester, England, Gowri was educated in Manchester and Leeds, UK, and moved to the United States in 2007. She has exhibited in the United States, the UK and internationally. She has been commissioned widely since 1993, including public works for Manchester Dental Hospital (UK), The Children's Center in Flowery Field (UK), Elmore Mountain Bread (US) and Johnson State College (US). Grants received include Arts Council England Professional Development Grants, Creative Industries Awards and Vermont Studio Center Scholarships.

My Country, Gowri Savor, ink pen on paper,
12" x 9", 2008



LORENE TAURERewa

Lorene Taurerewa recently relocated to New York from New Zealand. She exhibits internationally and is represented in private, institutional and corporate collections in New Zealand, Hong Kong, France, America and Australia. Taurerewa is a recipient of major New Zealand Arts Council awards; and she was the artist-in-residence at The Art Studio of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, Korea. More recently she has exhibited at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia and the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, Australia.

Twins, Lorene Taurerewa, 59" x 59", charcoal on paper, 2010



IAN JEHLE

Ian Jehle, Canadian-born, is currently based in Washington, DC. He received his BFA from American University and his MFA from Columbia University. Jehle's solo exhibition, *Here's to You* at Gallery-ef in Tokyo opened in November 2007. His recent group exhibitions include *Me, You and Those Other Folks* at Flashpoint Gallery, Washington, DC; *Works on Paper*, curated by Carter Foster of the Whitney Museum of American Art, at Long Beach Foundation of the Arts, NJ; the Art-scape/Baltimore Museum of Art Juried Exhibition, 2005, curated by the BMA's Gary Simmons and Darsie Alexander; and *Traveling with Gulliver*, a group exploration of *Gulliver's Travels*, at the District of Columbia Arts Center. Jehle also convened and moderated the lecture series *Who Do You Love* at DCAC.

Nekisha Durrett, Ian Jehle, colored pencil on paper, 63" x 47", 2007

DAVID FOX



David Fox was born in London, England, and has been a resident of the United States for many years. He studied in England at Wimbledon School of Art and at St. Martin's School of Art. He received a Masters of Fine Art in Painting from MICA, Baltimore. David Fox has exhibited his work in many galleries and museums across the US, including a recent solo exhibition at the George Adams Gallery in Chelsea, New York. He is a cross-disciplinary visual artist working in painting, printmaking, drawing, sculpture and photography. Mr. Fox is also a singer-songwriter and published author. He performs regularly in New York City as a solo artist and with his rock band TCA. Recently he has formed an acoustic duet, Rain Society. As a playwright, two of his short plays have been produced. "Self Portrait," a political drama about the interrogation of a dissident, was performed at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art. "What's on Your Mind" was performed at the Turtleshell Theatre, Off Off Broadway.

The Opportunists, David Fox, ink on paper
60" x 84", 2007



BILLY COLBERT

Billy Colbert was born in Baltimore. He earned his undergraduate degree from Frostburg State University and received his Master's in Fine Arts degree from the University of Delaware where he was a Presidential Fellow. In 2000, Colbert's work was chosen as Best in Show for the Carroll Harris Simms Nation Black Art Competition which was juried by the late John T. Scott, MacArthur Fellow and Artist. The artist is represented by Mason Murer Fine Art in Atlanta. Colbert's work has been reviewed by *Art News*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Memphis Commercial Appeal* and *The Washington Post*. His artwork is in many private and public collections including The African American Museum, Dallas, Texas; The National Academy of Sciences, Washington, DC; and the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

Untitled (detail), Billy Colbert, dimensions variable, multimedia installation, 2010



JENNY LADEN

Born in Philadelphia, Jenny Laden earned a B.A. in Art History at Barnard College and an M.F.A. from New York University. Her work has been shown in Boston, Chicago, Berlin, San Francisco, Miami, Philadelphia and New York City. She has had five solo shows in New York: three with Cornell DeWitt Gallery, one with Jeff Bailey Gallery, and one at Heskin Contemporary, where she is currently represented. Her work has been critically recognized in *The New York Times*, *The New York Post*, *New York Magazine*, *Time Out New York*, *Dealer DeLuxe Magazine*, and *NY Art World Magazine*, as well as in various art blogs, including *New York Magazine's* 'Culture Culture'.

Lemon Drops (detail), Jenny Laden, watercolor, pencil, ink on paper; 10' x 7', 2010