

PAINT MADE FLESH



Featuring works created between 1952 and 2006 in Europe and the United States, **Paint Made Flesh** focuses on artists whose depictions of the human figure denote biological, psychological, and spiritual volatility. While the physical properties of paint enable these artists to achieve a visual and tactile simulation of flesh, the way they manipulate the medium also allows them to suggest intangible aspects of existence such as emotions, memories, and sexuality. This connotes a kind of incarnation; not the sacred “word made flesh,” as the Bible describes Christ, but the secular “paint made flesh,” as artists transcribe humanity.

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As vital expressions of human vulnerability and sensuality, the works in *Paint Made Flesh* belong in an art historical continuum threading back through the Expressionism of Chaïm Soutine and Vincent van Gogh to the tragic humanism of Rembrandt and Titian. The exhibition has equal relevance for contemporary society, in which primary meaning still derives from the representation of the human form from a variety of sources, whether in visual arts, new medical imaging technology, or fashion, film, and advertising.

Yet recent assessments of art history consign figure painting to the periphery of contemporary practice. Many of the earliest artists in the exhibition were dismissed as insignificant during the mid-twentieth century by mainstream critics, who preferred a reductive abstraction that emphasized the universal language of color and form to the highly personal illustrations of emotional tumult and social angst contained in paintings like those in *Paint Made Flesh*. This exclusion continued into the postmodern era of the late 1970s and 1980s, when influential Marxist critics argued that painting had died because it was intrinsically unable to escape its historical role of providing unique commodities for the delectation of the wealthy collecting class. As a category of art making, painting worked against the revolutionary purpose that such critics argued was art's mandate. Postmodern critics further contended that painterly tropes such as the energetic brushstroke were no longer expressions of inner urgency, but had become devices employed by cynical artists as false signs of authenticity, reinforcing outdated notions of the artist's mark as an index of the anguished self—the van Gogh syndrome. Although many artists working in the 1970s and 1980s used depictions of the human body to reflect on conflicts between the self and society, the critically favored mediums for such explorations were photography and video, in part because they mirrored contemporary mass media and its penchant for reproducible images over tangible substance.

By the late 1980s, painting began to regain critical acceptance for its capacity to provide both a symbolic and material equivalent to complex aspects of the human condition. Maintaining that an artist's personal compulsions, social and economic status, and creative responses to history as it unfolds can after all be beautifully expressed through the internal

relationships of a painting—its brushwork, colors, and forms—*Paint Made Flesh* suggests that paint has been and continues to be the most suitable medium for symbolizing bodily experiences in a layered and sensual way. The works in the exhibition do more than reflect the personal emotions of the artist; when arrayed by nationality and chronology, as they are, a pattern emerges that shows them to be windows onto attitudes and philosophical positions that define an essential part of the story of our times.

The prelude to the exhibition resides in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, where the burgeoning study of psychology had begun demonstrating that internal forces defined people's true selves. Artists such as van Gogh and the German Expressionist Emil Nolde conveyed the emotional complexity and primal realities of the human condition through intense and unnatural colors, anatomical distortions, and energetic brushstrokes. By the time Surrealism arose in the 1920s, humanity could be best defined, suggested the poet André Breton, in terms of psychology rather than anatomy. Breton believed that artists and poets could use the transformative power of their work to integrate memories, emotions, and dreams with the social and political realms, making art into a metaphor for human wholeness.

The works in *Paint Made Flesh* were all painted after 1950, when the horrors of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Holocaust had made it difficult for artists to imagine representing a psyche that was not in some way fractured or damaged. Many artists of the postwar generation had turned to abstraction. Writing in 1958, with memories of the war still fresh, Abstract Expressionist painter Mark Rothko made it clear why figure painting was not a viable option for him and his circle: "It was with the utmost reluctance that I found the figure could not serve my purposes ... but a time came when none of us could use the figure without mutilating it."²

The existentialist despair felt by Rothko was reflected in much figurative work of the 1950s. Fellow Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning chose the path of mutilation to express the sensations of repulsion and psychic dissoluteness felt by many during and after the war. His use of gestural brushstrokes to create figures that are both sensual and grotesque conflates the disintegration of the human form with his own anxiety regarding women. De Kooning was



Fig. 1. Pablo Picasso. *The Artist and his Model*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 38 1/8 x 51 1/4 in. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, Gift of The Seymour H. Knox Foundation, Inc., 1965 (1965.19). © Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

inspired by the example of Pablo Picasso, whose bleak images of fragmented figures, especially women, had mirrored both the artist's own misogyny and the brutality of the twentieth century even before World War II. A late work, Picasso's *The Artist and His Model* (1964) (fig. 1), triggers feelings about forces that haunt all flesh—sexuality fulfilled and denied, the pain and loss of aging, and, hovering at the painting's edge, the inevitability of death.

These themes echo throughout the early works in the exhibition, beginning with the section on American art produced between the 1950s and mid-1970s. Steeped in the Social Realist tradition, paintings by Jack Levine and Alice Neel use distorted anatomy and unhealthy coloration as a kind of text, “writing” the effects of poverty, despair, and alienation upon the skin of the people they portray. Hyman Bloom's lyrical translation of an autopsy, *The Hull* (1952), conveys his view of death as metamorphosis, the disturbingly beautiful breakdown of the body as a moment of biological passage. Similarly, Ivan Albright meditates on aging and decay in *The Vermonter: If Life Were Life There Would be No Death* (1966–77), where skin is palpably distressed as if marked with the passage of time and the living agents of decomposition.

Philip Guston had been a successful Abstract Expressionist through the 1960s, but by 1970 had returned to the figure as a way of expressing his distress at the negative impact of a conflicted world on the individual. *Web* (1975) (fig. 2) is a tragi-comic allegory of the self trapped in the entanglements of its own history, behaviors, and delusions. This cartoon-like painting depicts

the artist's disembodied head, its single eye staring down as if confronting its impending return to the soil.

Already disillusioned, as Guston was, by the horrors of World War II, many people living between the 1950s and 1980s had additional anxieties brought on by geopolitical tensions between brutal and expansionist communist regimes in the East and a militaristic capitalism in the West, both of which thrived on the ethos of political and social conformity. Artists in the United States and Germany (the front line between these two forces) sought a humanistic alternative, in which the individual—whose body and spirit bore the brunt of these ideologies—was at the center:



Guston's work is stylistically similar to the rough, gestural approach to figure painting that rose to prominence in Germany and the United States during the last decades of the Cold War. Often linked under the rubric of Neo-Expressionism, the archaizing imagery of Georg Baselitz and A. R. Penck evoked early twentieth-century German Expressionism as a way of expunging the memory of Nazism, which had decreed that Expressionism was “degenerate.” Their works also rejected the propagandizing Social Realism of totalitarian East Germany, while reflecting the anxiety engendered by nationalistic rhetoric that made the Cold War seem ready to explode at any time.

The ambiguous iconography in paintings by Baselitz, in particular, conveys his resistance to the

Fig. 2. Philip Guston. *Web*, 1975. Oil on canvas, 67 x 97 1/4 in. The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Edward R. Broida. © Estate of Philip Guston, courtesy of McKee Gallery, New York. Photograph © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

dangerous ideological clarity that dominated German experiences in the middle third of the century. In *Nude Elke 2* (1976), Baselitz inverts the figure, invoking a subliminal desire on the part of the irritated viewer to restore it to "correctness" (conforming to an expected visual ideology) by flipping it back to its natural position. Stylistically similar, but less politically motivated, Americans Julian Schnabel and Susan Rothenberg used strong colors and crudely painted figures to suggest a primal vitality they believed had been lost in the technological West during the 1970s and 1980s.

Working in isolation from German and American painting, figure painters in postwar England reacted against the social rigidity of the Victorian era while capturing feelings of the anxiety, revulsion, and nihilism brought to the fore by their experiences of World War II. Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, and Francis Bacon each felt themselves to be outsiders in London society. The first three were raised in Jewish émigré families (Freud and Auerbach were refugees from Nazi Germany), and Bacon was a homosexual atheist, brought up in Catholic Ireland by his disapproving English parents before moving to London as a teenager. In various ways, these artists painted figures that have suffered the pain, both self- and socially inflicted, of existential isolation. In *Three Studies for the Portrait of Henrietta Moraes* (1963) (fig. 3),



Fig. 3. Francis Bacon. *Three Studies for the Portrait of Henrietta Moraes*, 1963. Oil on canvas, three panels, each panel 14 1/8 x 12 1/8 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The William S. Paley Collection (SPC61.1990). © The Estate of Francis Bacon / ARS, New York / DACS, London. Photograph © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

Bacon used the viscous properties of paint to approximate the violent intermingling of inner substances such as blood, brains, mucous, and muscle. Freud focused instead on the dry surface of the skin with its various opacities, translucencies, and topographical features—bumps, scabs, scars, and wrinkles—giving tactile form to the subject's physical and emotional history.

The interest in psychological revelation continues with younger British artists such as Jenny Saville, whose subjects seem composed of patched-together bits of flesh and skin, embodying conflicts between the self and a society in which ideals of feminine beauty and weight are often only attainable through the surgeon's knife. To a greater extent than Bacon and Freud, Saville emphasizes the link between personal disaffection and the external forces of society.

The American artist Eric Fischl's *Frailty is a Moment of Self-Reflection* (1996) (fig. 4), created by the painter while mourning his father's death, is an even more poignant consideration of human vulnerability. By depicting skin as if it is made of parchment, Fischl has stripped away any sense of decorum or artifice to reveal a painful truth about the eroding impact of time. In contrast, irony-laced portraits by Michaël Borremans, Lisa Yuskavage, and John Currin combine



Fig. 4. Eric Fischl. *Frailty is a Moment of Self-Reflection*, 1996. Oil on linen, 68 x 58 in. Courtesy of the Artist

Fig. 5. Daniel Richter: *Duisen*, 2004.
Oil on canvas, 106 1/4 x 137 3/4 in. Private Collection,
Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York

the distinctive likeness of their subjects with sources derived from art history, old movie posters, and girly pinups, conflating individuals and cultural types. In the paintings of each, skin seems to be made of plastic or covered in heavy makeup, reinforcing the inherent artificiality of the social persona, something that becomes increasingly at issue in the era of plastic surgery and digital beautification.

Recently, artists have mixed expressive styles to allude to conflicts between the globalizing forces of economics and technology and the powerful pull of identity as measured by nationality, ethnicity, religion, or politics. This tension is striking in Daniel Richter's *Duisen* (2004) (fig. 5), which depicts a mob of psychedelically painted specters in the nighttime streets of a city. *Duisen* is a deliberately misspelled anagram for the German word *sueden*, meaning south, making of these electric ghouls the front line of a massive migration that inspires fear among the native population. Painted less as flesh and blood than transparent figments of day-glo acidity, they are visible only through the thermal imaging devices used by police in their nocturnal patrols; paint made not into flesh, but emotion and heat.

Contemporary artists such as Saville and Richter define human substance as an embodiment of complex social values. This reflects a shift from the feelings of isolation and cultural alienation that marked works inspired by the anxiety of the post-World War II period. The recent work in this exhibition suggests that, however fractured they may be, bodies and minds are inseparable from culture; all three stream together to form an individual's sense of self. As a culture goes through rapid changes, or becomes hostile, or when a person or group is violently transplanted, the result can be a disruption in the foundation of identity. This, and the intrinsic desire to recover and reshape who we are, constitutes the history of our times as it has been written in paint.

Mark Scala
Chief Curator, Frist Center for the Visual Arts



Notes: 1. See Andre Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1969).
2. Dore Ashton, *About Rothko* (1983; New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 119.

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January 23–May 10, 2009
Frist Center for the Visual Arts

June 20–September 13, 2009
The Phillips Collection

October 25, 2009–January 3, 2010
Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

This exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities.

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