IN PRAISE OF FIGURATIVE ART

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A prize for figurative art is a daring choice at a time when critics writing about a man running through the Duveen Gallery of Tate Britain dominate national newspaper arts columns. This is another work by Martin Creed, infamous for winning the Turner Prize with his light switch piece. While the recent historic figurative shows have thrilled, there is no doubt that lovers of more traditional figurative art have had a hard time seeing contemporary works that are exciting and fresh and not just anachronistic daubs relating back to a more innocent age.

There have been places to go to see current figurative art during the siege of the contemporary. Both the BP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery and the 'Summer Show' at the Royal Academy have continued to put up shows of artists, predominantly working in more traditional styles. But even the bastion of conservatism the Royal Academy has questioned the validity of the more traditional figural proponents by inviting contemporary artists Michael Craig-Martin, Tracey Emin, Gary Hume, Jenny Saville and Antony Gormley to become Royal Academicians to join the dwindling ranks of more traditional figurative artists. The National Portrait Gallery itself has also broken the mould of traditional portraiture by commissioning portraits of contemporary figures like David Beckham in video, a less traditional medium by contemporary artists like Sam Taylor-Wood.

While the figurative artists may have felt under siege, under appreciated and not supported by art schools, major galleries and art institutions, this was not always the case. Not that long ago there were major shows at the Tate of Francis Bacon, William Coldstream, David Bomberg, Leon Kossoff, Lucian Freud, RB Kitaj and Frank Auerbach.

Hip collectors like singer David Bowie unapologetically bought Euan Uglow, an unashamed figurative painter who utilised the old fashioned calliper measuring technique which, rather like contemporary architecture, he insisted on showing on the outside rather than being masked by decoration. Uglow owed more artistically to the technique of Coldstream than to the great modernist figurative painter of the 20th century, Paul Cézanne.

There was a moment when the figurative legacy seemed to have become the national contemporary style, but this was all to change with a single show, 'Freeze', in 1988 in a warehouse which was curated by a young, then unknown art student Damien Hirst, and which marked the birth of a group of artists to be named YBAs (Young British Artists). The members of this group became the darlings of critics, gallerists and the next generation of young curators and were soon to become more powerful than the critics who were writing the column inches.

Into this new world established critics like Brian Sewell, a selector for this prize, attacked the more progressive critics like Richard Cork, another selector. Sewell argued that technique was being disenfranchised in the pursuit of conceptual ideas and materiality, while Cork argued that there was no right or wrong way but that technique alone was not enough.

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At one point, painting and by extension the traditional skills were officially declared dead and in a memorable television programme claiming that painting was dead, *Guardian* critic Waldemar Januszczak was terrified by a drunk and out of control Tracey Emin.

As an artist it seemed important to take a position. Either you were a conceptual artist or you were not. If you were a conceptual painter then your works had to be explained in a different terminology than if you were a more 'instinctual' artist. The irony of course was that the work often looked the same. A figurative artist like George Shaw, who was included in hip exhibitions like 'Days Like These', the Tate Triennial of 2003, and was beloved by the conceptual hip critics like Gordon Burn, could also pass muster with the more traditional critics. Works in this exhibition, like *Off road – SUV* by Nick Pace or *Festival* by Jake Clark both walk this tight rope between the two critical camps.

Did this polarisation have an affect on artists themselves? I think most definitely.

The choice of where you went to study was essential. Artists in this period who wanted to be more traditional figurative practitioners felt marginalised and unsupported in their institutions. When I visited British sculptor Thomas Houseago in Los Angeles where he now lives and works, he admitted he left his native England to study in Holland as he felt so unsupported in his home country. Houseago is now a "hot" contemporary artist collected by all the right collectors including both the Rubells and Steven Cohen, yet his work evolves clearly from traditional figurative sculpture. He himself unashamedly admits that his heroes are Rodin and Michelangelo.

If you were accepted as hip then figurative work, even of the most traditional variety would be accepted as "cool" and contemporary. Marc Quinn's recent show 'Evolution' at the White Cube included a set of the most conservative marble sculptures to be seen recently in a contemporary gallery. The subject matter, foetuses emerging roughly from stone, were based I was told in hushed tones on Michelangelo's slaves and made in marble from Pietrasanta where the marble was quarried for Michelangelo's *David*. The irony was that these works were put forward as traditional but their robotic technique bore no critical resemblance to the sensitive rendering and relationship to materiality that was evident in the master's work.

Even arguably the most influential and expensive artist of our day, Damien Hirst, has recently and increasingly turned toward figuration, clothing it in the rhetoric of conceptual. His super realistic paintings revealed in 'The Elusive Truth' a large show in 2005 at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, was an indication that the tide had turned back towards figuration. Hirst found his images in newspapers, on computers or in personal experience like the birth of his child and then had his assistants render them onto canvases that looked remarkably old fashioned. The trick was to close your eyes to the signature and judge them for what they were.

While the more conceptual artists were exploring the possibility of figuration, the more traditional adherents of the subject were playing with the potential of the conceptual. This is not surprising as artists spend a lot of time playing with materials. It would be surprising if artists as savvy and competent as Anthony Green, an older Royal Academician, was not exploring the toy chest of his more conceptual artistic peers like Tracey Emin. Green's contribution to the Threadneedle exhibition shows a figurative artist comfortable with the painterly tools of his trade and exploring the potential of more sculptural possibilities. It, like many of the entries in the show, illustrates the struggle between painting and sculpture first explored when artists like Ellsworth Kelly started shaping their canvases and exploring the potential of two versus three-dimensional work.

Sculptors are not excluded from this exhibition and Deborah van der Beek with her imposing large centaur sculpture, composed seemingly of an agglomeration of materials, and the wall piece of faceless

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hoodies, a work by Janette Harris made of discarded plastic Tesco bags, flirt with new materials. Tim Shaw's *Tank on fire*, a mysterious black sculpture, owes more than a passing glance to the vitrine works of the Chapman Brothers and is none the worse for it.

The real potential of a prize for figuration would be the ability to encourage artists to be proud of their involvement with a medium that has recently been perceived as irrelevant and old fashioned. The starting point might well be to accept the increasing merging together of the formerly disparate groups of artists. It should not have been surprising to have a painter, Gillian Carnegie, appear as a finalist for the Turner Prize in 2005. She was merely following in the footsteps of Jenny Saville who, with her explorations of her own body seen in 'Sensation' and later in the Saatchi Collection, proved that there were new ways of depicting the female form. There are several painters in this exhibition also experimenting with new forms of portraiture and scale, not least among them the veteran artist Tai-Shan Schierenberg and Eloiza Mills with her intricately detailed miniature portraits on copper.

So is a cultural divide necessary or even relevant any more? While the bastions of the conceptual move ever closer to the figurative and the more traditional artists move closer to the conceptual, a more consensual approach with more diverse exhibitions becomes ever more relevant. It will be interesting to see the evolution of this prize over the years ahead. Hopefully there will be more and more artists entering into the arena of figuration from both sides of this narrowing cultural divide.