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Those Lofty Heights: Five contemporary artists compete at the pinnacle

By Arthur Whitman
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(Photo: Provided)

The issue of realism within modern and contemporary art has always been a fractious one. Although we might think we know it when we see it, it is difficult to define or assess as a whole.

Realism lies at the very roots of modernism, with French painters like Gustave Courbet and Édouard Manet decisively challenging conservative taste in the middle of the 19th century. Furthered by Impressionism, the revolution they helped to instigate was a matter both of style and "subject matter." To an unprecedented degree, the material facts of the painting—brushwork, areas of color arranged on a flat surface—came to be emphasized at the expense of the kind of polished illusionism that characterized the legacy of the Renaissance. At the same time (in many, though not all cases), contemporary and everyday subjects came to be favored over more traditional and lofty ones.

Histories of subsequent modern art, though, tend to contrast realism with an emerging impulse towards abstraction. Realism has often been presented as a conservative retreat to the past, or an unserious concession to popular taste. Or a politicized dogmatism: both Nazi and Communist regimes imposed a "realism" indebted to the academic art of the nineteenth century—ironically the very opposite of Manet and company. Even the less-obviously retardataire American art funded by the Depression-era Works Progress Administration came to seem backwards.

The collapse of a critical consensus around modernism and abstraction in the late 20th century has been something of a mixed blessing for the self-consciously realist artists of today. Although our pluralist era seemingly opens up space for a "revival" of realism, the basic sincerity—and commitment to empathy and presence—that typifies such artists has been out of keeping with postmodernism's bent for the conceptual and deconstructive.

Currently on display at the Syracuse University Galleries, "Poetry of Content: Five Contemporary Representational Artists" is a show of major importance. The brainchild of long-time SU art professor Jerome Witkin, the exhibit offers a distinctly personal lens on contemporary realism—one that is tough minded but hopeful, generously diverse, and aesthetically sophisticated.

The show features nearly fifty works by five mature, highly accomplished artists: Robert Birmelin, Tim Lowly, Bill Murphy, Gillian Pederson-Krag, and Joel Sheesley. Birmelin and Murphy are based in New York City while Lowly and Sheesley work in the Chicago-area. A former Cornell professor and a long-time resident of the Ithaca area, Pederson-Krag has lived and worked for the past few years in Santa Cruz, California.

Although the work of these five artists is difficult to generalize about, a theme that runs through the exhibition is a sort of productive conversation between modernism and the legacy of the Renaissance tradition. These artists value this tradition and sometimes evoke it explicitly. But they reject the slavish devotion to "Old Master" aesthetics that characterizes the recent Classical Realist movement.

Witkin is a legendary figure on the Syracuse campus, where he has taught since 1971. His own painting, frequently done on a mural-like scale, combines assertive brushwork—indebted to his early abstract expressionist phase—with a figurative and narrative complexity grounded in the ambitions of European tradition. He has sought to revive the genre of history painting with ambitious works grounded in personal and social trauma—motivated in part by his Jewish heritage, the Holocaust has been a major theme.

A major retrospective, "Drawn to Paint: The Art of Jerome Witkin," was held at the SU Art Galleries in fall 2011.

"Poetry of Content" fills the SU's Lowe Galleries—the largest and most central exhibition space in the university's spacious Shaffer Art Building. (Adjacent galleries house work from the school's permanent collections as well as several smaller temporary exhibits, all of them worth seeing.)

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Bill Murphy (born 1952), whose work hangs in the front, is represented exclusively with work on paper: drawings, prints, and watercolors. His work has the most far-reaching—or scattered—feel here, with self-portraits, interior scenes, and urban landscapes.

In his most striking pieces here, he does for the waterways and industrial ruins of his native Staten Island something like what the 18th century printmaker Giovanni Battista Piranesi did for classical Rome. Murphy's etchings on the theme are particularly rich. Gravesend: The Persistence of Memory (2010) shows the decaying skeleton of an antiquated ship, the dark brown of the foreground contrasting with the thin gray-blue of the distant skyline. A circular tondo, The End Days, Kreischerville (2007), recalls the neighborhood's brickmaking past.

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Tim Lowly (born 1958) is a musician as well as a painter. His art is intimately personal as well as moral and political. A major focus over the past three decades has been his severely disabled daughter Temma, who is the central subject of his acrylic on panel paintings here. After suffering cardiac arrest as a newborn, Temma has been cortically blind and suffers frequent seizures. She is unable to speak or much move on her own; Lowly has described her as "profoundly other."

Lowly has cited the influence of early Renaissance art with its transitional character—poised between the hieratic, otherworldly quality of Medieval religious painting and incipient Renaissance naturalism. His paintings here also recall the paintings and drawings of Georges Seurat, who sought to merge the broken brushwork of Impressionism with the formal poise of classicism. Photography is another important source.

Nearly black-and-white and incorporating pencil as well as acrylic, Culture of Adoration (2008) is the show's most memorable work. Like several other large paintings here, it has been done on several contiguous wood panels—a central one shows Temma, reclined awkwardly in the foreground on a sort of makeshift bed. A figure drawing class gathers around to picture her. They are arranged in a photographically-derived "splayed perspective," forming a sort of enclosing arc.

The title draws a parallel with the Adoration of the Magi, a traditional theme in Christian iconography—like the figures gathered to adore the baby Jesus, this is a scene of palpable empathy.

A pair of "couch pictures," See (2001) and Shift (2002) show Temma seated with her mother Sherrie. Painted solidly in shades of gray, the former shows the two figures in profile. The latter piece is remarkable for it's subtle painterly transcription of light and photographic motion blur.

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Joel Sheesley (born 1950) works with oil on canvas and has been known for his suburban and domestic interior scenes.

His major series of the past decade has had a seemingly unlikely focus—a pair of depressions in the artist's asphalt driveway that fill up with water when it rains. Echoing earlier paintings inspired by maps, these paintings take up a bird's-eye-view. Lacking horizon-lines, the ground encompasses us—we fall to earth but the reflective water affords us a view of the heavens. Sheesley captures the grainy texture of his driveway by actually rubbing his unstretched canvases over the pavement.

In the square Messenger (2008), we see up top a pair of feet and the bottom of ladder—these are reflected below in dark silhouette. The ladder, suggesting spiritual ascension, is a familiar motif in Sheesley's work—here it seems oddly unsupported. Noah (2012), Sounding (2009), and The Hunter, Earth's Crammed with Heaven (2011) adopt a near-panoramic format. In the former, the artist himself appears, white-haired and dressed in camping clothes, building a smoking fire.

The chaos of city life has long been the major focus for Robert Birmelin (born 1933). Coarsely rendered, his emphatically modernist paintings attempt to reconcile the active, slippery qualities of vision with the stability that is inherent to the picture as a form.

Two recent acrylic canvases—Penn Station, Lower Level—with Prodigal Forgiven (2008) and Watcher at the Window (2014)—exemplify an approach Birmelin has been exploring since the sixties. The perspective is an emphatically first-person one, placing us in his urban scenes. We see a world in movement, coming apart. Other people and limbs—disembodied, belonging to we know not whom—appear dissolving and dislocated. His colors and brushwork are ungainly, earnest but sometimes difficult to like.

A mural-sized acrylic, Overpass (1991) has been painted on four narrow upright canvases, hung side-to-side with thin margins in-between. The piece shows a riot of figures and limbs hovering about a bridge crossing a busy highway.

Birmelin is also showing drawn studies and etchings—the latter of which treat his signature themes with an elegant concision.

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A painter and printmaker of remarkable singularity, Pederson-Krag (born 1938) is a conservative modernist in the tradition of Balthus and Giorgio Morandi. She's also an eminent Ithacan—a 1963 Cornell M.F.A. and a professor at the school between 1966 and 1979, whose work maintains a quiet local influence.

In 2012, the Burdett -based Larson Publications published Gillian Pederson-Krag: Paintings and Etchings 1970 – 2011, an amply illustrated overview of her work. The book includes several thoughtful essays by the artist discussing her background and philosophy of art. In one on "Unity," she writes that:

What makes a painting meaningful is the spectacle of ordinary content living together with the equally important life of the picture plane and the unity of the whole surface. I actually think that this phenomenon is attractive and satisfying because it reflects a feeling that we all have a kind of nostalgia for—the notion that life is somehow meaningful and while we are indeed separate, we continually seek out ways of discovering situations which will allow us to feel part of a larger whole.

Pederson-Krag's oils demonstrate her compelling credo. They're unabashedly beautiful and virtuosic in their palette, which makes them stand out among those of the other artists' here, who prefer a more muted or descriptive use of color. She is not a flashy painter but builds up her scenes in fleshy blocks and layered glazes.

Here her work encompasses landscape, interiors, portraits, still life—missing are her more explicitly fantastic or allegorical images. But everything, no matter how naturalistic in detail or prosaic in subject, has a distinctly dreamlike quality unmistakably hers.

Hung together, Interior (2010) and Studio Interior (1980) show a man and a woman, respectively, seated in rooms that are exquisitely intimate yet stage-like.

Pederson-Krag's etchings have been compared to those of the Dutch Baroque eccentric Hercules Seghers. Her three landscape prints here are wonderlands of subtle texture and tone—each monochromatic but different in color. Landscape (2000) is particularly striking with its bird's-eye-view and evocation of classical ruins.

"Poetry of Content" is on display at the Syracuse University Art Galleries from Dec. 17, 2015 to March 20t, 2016. An opening reception will be held at the Syracuse University Art Galleries on Jan. 21, from 5 to 7 p.m. with Lowly, Pederson-Krag, and Sheesley in attendance. All five artists will speak at a round table discussion to be held on March 3 from 7 to 9 p.m. at the university's Watson Auditorium. More information can be found at suart.syr.edu •