American Art Today: Narrative Painting

The Art Museum at Florida International University Frost Art Museum
The Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum

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American Art Today:
Narrative Painting

The Art Museum
at
Florida International University
The State University of Florida at Miami
American Art Today:
Narrative Painting

May 6 – June 4, 1988

Organized by
Dahlia Morgan for
The Art Museum
at
Florida International University
The State University of Florida at Miami
Exhibiting Artists

Philip Ayers
Robert Birmelin
Jim Butler
David Carbone
Beth Foley
James Gingerich
Leon Golub
Mark Greenwold
Luis Jimenez
Gabriel Laderman
Alfred Leslie
James McGarrell
Raoul Middleman
Daniel O’Sullivan
Jim Peters
Mark Tansey
Jerome Witkin

Lenders to the Exhibition

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Eli Broad Family Foundation, Los Angeles, California
CDS Gallery, New York, New York
Jessica Darraby Gallery, Los Angeles, California
Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, New York
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Brian Hauptli and Norman Francis, San Francisco, California
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Emily Fisher Landau, New York, New York
Adair Margo Gallery, El Paso, Texas
Raoul Middleman, Baltimore, Maryland
Prudential Insurance Company of America, Newark, New Jersey
A. James Shapiro, New York, New York
and various other private collections, anonymously
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The Art Museum at Florida International University is proud to have organized American Art Today: Narrative Painting. This comprehensive exhibition follows last year's American Art Today: The Portrait, the 1986 American Art Today: Figure in the Landscape, and American Art Today: Still Life of 1985. These exhibitions were conceived as parts of an ongoing series that annually examines the contemporary response to traditional themes.

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Dahlia Morgan, Director

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Narrative Painting
Darden Pyron

Narrative Painting: Even at the end of the pluralistic twentieth century, the subject still evokes the smell not so distant of battle. Well it should. The rejection of narrative, plot, and even subject matter lies at the very heart of Modernist aesthetics. No value has shaped contemporary judgment more thoroughly than the repudiation of the narrative tradition. Even so, no value sets the twentieth century more apart from what has gone before in our civilization. In this regard, narrative constitutes an ultimate touchstone of the revolution that is twentieth century culture. In so far as Modernism or its legacy still lives, narrative as an aesthetic value still possesses the power to provoke passion and polemics.

While the issue of narrative content calls into question the fundamental tenants of contemporary aesthetics, it ignites still more explosive issues. What is the role of the audience or the congregation of viewers towards the art work? The emphasis upon subject matter, especially traditional narrative, tends to exaggerate the idea of sympathy and kinship between artist and audience, or the viewer and the artwork. Conversely, Modernism’s rejection of narrative parallels its skepticism of public taste. In its most extreme and polar expressions, narrative art retells old familiar stories, well known to all, while Modernism tells no stories at all or tells such dark, obscure, arcane and personalistic tales that only high priests of culture can understand and explain to baffled common folk.

Understanding the revival of narrative painting requires understanding the violent revolution against narrative in general and the special place of narrative in art before the barricades of Modernism went up in the first decades of this century.

Narrative in painting has its own history. Indeed, for much of the history of western art, paintings existed to tell some story or to affirm or to illustrate some narrative. The content of the stories changed, the narrative motive remained the same. Medieval and renaissance painting visually repeated Biblical tales and episodes from the lives of the saints: the annunciation, Christ’s passion, the martyrdom of St. Sebastian, St. George and the dragon, St. Martin and the beggar, and all the rest, of course. Emblematically key images evoked the full stories in the same way that the owl, the ox, the thunderbolt, and trident called to mind to ancient audiences the presence of Athene, Hera, Zeus, and Poseidon. If working with symbols allowed the potential of expressive space, artists worked freely within still narrower confines of religious narrative and produced work much closer to actual illustration. Giotto’s sequential scenes from the life of St. Francis exemplify the mode
but as late as the quattrocento, Masaccio's *The Tribute Money* did the same thing: In illustrating the story of Christ, St. Peter and the tax collectors, the artist used one canvas to depict three chronologically different aspects of the tale. The narrative impulse imposed its order even on the most innovative painters.

The fixed nature of particular stories themselves did not preclude the artists telling their own tales in the painting nor of charging their work with their own passions and sensibilities. At the same time, the richness of religious texts provided almost endless occasion for variety or emphasis. Somewhere in Scripture or the lives of saints, individual artists could find some story that spoke to their most personal motives and individual objectives. One thinks, for example, of the meaning with which Artemesia Gentileschi charged her repeated rendering of the man-killing Judith with the head of Holofernes. Rembrandt's "Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph" absorbed equally personal if antithetical values from this other Old Testament story. Sacred narrative allowed room for these various "sub-texts", but the adoption of classical and mythological subject matter opened painting to still wider contemporary values in the renaissance and invited artists to tell still more stories with still more various meanings. Leda and the Swan, Jupiter and Io, the Birth of Venus, Pan-inspired bacchanalia, and scenes from the lives of the philosophers provided subject matter for renaissance artists. Illustrating particular episodes from Homer, Virgil, and Greco-Roman texts, paintings of such subjects enticed artists and viewers to see beyond the confines of particular tales and invited them to consider the nature of art and creativity as a peculiar human phenomenon. The painting and the subject existed in vigorous harmony. For genre painting, too, in the renaissance, narrative content of particular canvases remained inseparable from the work itself. If not subordinate to style, technique, and manner, the content of the expression lived its own existence.

The Enlightenment and Romanticism affected the relationship between painting and narrative content still more profoundly. Most immediately, the new currents opened painting to still more numerous stories. These stories had new meanings and dictated new audiences, too. "The Death of Socrates" and "The Oath of the Horatii" or "Agrippina Returning with the Ashes of Germanicus" illustrated specific scenes from Greek and Roman history and legend, but they also affirmed the most potent contemporary political morality. Echoing through Western society at this time, the call for republican virtue, noble action, the dispassionate patriotism of the Classical age inspired
such canvases and fired them with contemporary significance. Democracy and political virtue combined to produce a rich episode in both history and painting between 1770 and 1830, and to provide, just so, a rich subject matter as well.

The eighteenth century’s revolution in narrative meaning signaled still more fundamental changes in the arts. The change in subject – and, by extension, the purpose of art – presaged a shift in the role of artist in society. As art effectively became political, artists themselves became political. They emerged as co-equals with the emerging leaders of independent national states. They heralded the new republican order and guarded the political icons and innovations they helped create. Classically, as with John Trumbull and Charles Willson Peale, in the United States, they often moved back and forth between the actual realms of art and politics or military service, and they did so in the same spirit that prompted them to combine these spheres. The historical or political narrative of mankind was clear to them: the development of the national state and republican political order. This grand concept of the narrative of human civilization also inspired their confidence in the morality and power of their painting.

The narrative’s domination of Enlightenment and Romantic thought extended into theory. Artist-critics formalized narrative meaning into formal codes and standards. This narrative-founded order lay at the very heart of the age’s hierarchical ranking of painting. Narrative content defined the order and merit of an individual work. History subjects topped the scale which then ranged downward through genre, portraits, landscapes, and finally still life. The most highly narrative and richly moral subjects dominated this scheme. The influence of narrative, especially the new political stories, penetrated genre painting, landscape, and even portraiture. Charles Willson’s Peale’s work in America again offers a nice example, so that he intended his series of portraits of national leaders at his Philadelphia museum to emblemize American and republican virtue just as clearly as his history paintings did. Of the later generation of American artists, S. F. B. Morse possessed the same moral, political, and aesthetic ambitions which he exemplified nicely in his full length portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette, with all its profusion of rich political symbols. Also among American painters, the depiction of American landscape was intended to evoke the same national spirit – to tell, in effect, the same or a similar story of moral power linked with political virtue.

Before the middle of the nineteenth century, the overt political motives of the “The Horatii” and “Agrippina” waned; it did not die
Figment, 1986
Philip Ayers

Oil on canvas
48 x 62"
Courtesy of A. James Shapiro
New York
even then. The murals beneath the dome of the United States Capitol speak to the state of History Painting at mid-century in this country. The Centennial of the Revolution breathed new life into history painting in the United States, too. The mode also persisted in Europe, as in Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier’s, “Napoleon III at the Battle of Solferino 24 June 1859.” By and large, however, the mid-century witnessed a fundamental shift in narrative painting. Landscape, but to a far greater extent, genre painting preempted history as the prime subject of narrative art. That shift is significant indeed. After mid-century, narrative painting and genre painting became virtually synonymous. That equation is critical. If narrative as History Painting had celebrated reserve, restraint, patriotism, and duty – especially military duty, the huge explosion of genre painting in the nineteenth century’s last half advanced very different values. Peasants, rural folk, farmers, workers, and other ordinary people became the subject of genre paintings, but the depiction of scenes from everyday life focused more thoroughly on the comings and goings of the swelling ranks of the rich and new rich in both Europe and America. At the same time, the vestiges of the old democratic, egalitarian politics remained, if latent now in the narrative content. What the rich shared in common with the poor tended to unify the images as well–basic sympathies and emotions common to all mankind. By stressing human interest and emotional content, the new genre painting affirmed a new narrative; the universality of human sentiment. Narrative painting – in any of its expressions – always maintained close connections with the emotions and to inspiring the viewer one way or another. Late nineteenth century narrative as genre pushed this impulse to its limits. By this measure, then, sentimentality became the password for narrative painting by the end of the century, and the identification of narrative and sentimentality became one of the critical elements in the repudiation of the entire package of aesthetic and moral values that was brewing in Western Civilization. That reaction came soon enough.

Well before the genre-narrative school had peaked, the impressionists had challenged its most fundamental assumptions. They mounted a two-front war against narrative in painting. On the one hand, they reversed the order of merit in subject matter: They favored the least story-laden content – still life and landscape. On the other, they elevated technique at the expense of content and subject altogether. Even when they turned to traditional subjects of genre painting – Degas’ “Glass of Absinthe,” Renoir’s “Boating Party,” Seurat’s “Bathers” – their new motives shaped their vision. They sought to distance the
On The Street: Gesture and Response, 1982

Robert Birmelin
painting from the story they were telling so that the artwork acquired autonomy and authenticity on its own terms. Their painting, in effect, attracted attention to itself rather than to the subject or content. Although certainly less true of some impressionists than others – Mary Cassatt never abandoned her concern with content, the tendency remained to approach even genre subjects as “studies” rather than as narratives per se. James McNeill Whistler provided the most dramatic expression of the new convention in his “Arrangement in Black and Gray” which was, of course, a classic genre subject, “The Artist’s Mother.” The title named the objective: to flatten the subject’s otherwise evocative sentiment and sentimentality into an abstraction of design and color.

For the impressionists and those who followed in their steps, the subject, content, and narrative of the painting lacked relative reality. Reality, instead, lay in the individual artist’s vision, perception, or, indeed, impression of an object rather than in the thing itself. This mode celebrated both the artist and the artwork in contrast to the subject – or for that matter, the viewer. If the Enlightenment aesthetic had pressed the case of the artist as a leader of the polity, the impressionists introduced the artist as something nearly divine. The painter did not need to tell the old stories and linger, nor indeed, any stories at all. The artists’ merit lay in the innovative and miraculous relationship between themselves and the object recreated. These tendencies and general characteristics laid the basis for Twentieth century aesthetic dogma. In so far as the impressionists won the great victory, their values – including the renunciation of narrative content – still determine the Modern bias against content.

As the impressionists were challenging traditional painting at its very core of values, other currents in Western society were leading to the same ends: the skepticism or renunciation of plot, content, and subject matter in art. Indeed, if narrative painting has its own history, narrative in more general terms as an aesthetic standard has ebbed and flowed as an historical issue in aesthetic judgment as well. Understanding those currents, which still run powerfully against narrative truth in high art at least, encourages understanding the influences that underlie the reaffirmation of the form, as exhibited in this show.

Within twentieth century intellectual history, few values hold place with the aesthetic antagonism to the story line or meaning in a public sense. Although the idea existed before the First World War, that conflict confirmed and exaggerated the notion of discontinuities and fragmen-
Tourmaline, 1986
Jim Butler

Oil on canvas
30 x 42″
Courtesy of Tibor De Nagy Gallery
New York
tation rather than continuity and linear flow. For the generation that fought it, the Great War confirmed the awful influence of the national state and national rivalries – the very bedrock of the Narrative as History Painting. Narrative-cum-genre fared worse. The smiling faces of the bourgeoisie bid a death’s skull and corruption. Peasants, workers, and the lower orders were no better: at best hapless cannon fodder; at worst they inspired and drove the juggernaut of the nation-state, in the estimate of the Generation of 1900. Meanwhile, youth had read Freud and Darwin and Spencer. They found there evidence for their biases. Religion had hoodwinked them – so had the stories of the Bible and the Saints. The family had hoodwinked them – patriarchal morality was a prison. The economic order hoodwinked them – the free market system was rigged. The state and politics had hoodwinked them – progress and national virtue was a chimera. The oldest stories in the culture lost their old power. As they jettisoned the specific narratives, they also challenged the entire idea of meaning through narrative. They faced, or so they determined, the hardest, coldest, most unsentimental world. Little mattered much, and nothing mattered entirely. In this context of values, the only thing that counted for much at all was style, elan, and spirit or of keeping up the bold front in the face of despair’s omnipresent threat.

Such values radically effected all phases of the arts. Hemingway insisted he wanted to tell no story at all but merely to describe the random and even meaningless events in his heroes’ lives. William Faulkner chopped up the story line into so many fragments as to call into question the existence of a plot at all. Musical line disappeared from symphonies and concert music. And, of course, in painting, the works of all the exhibitors in the Armory Show of 1913 confirmed these motives. Mood, light, color, and chiarascuro substituted for narrative, line, plot, and content. Irony, paradox, mystery, and obscurity became the criteria by which a work was judged. The thirties briefly stopped the trend. In this time, narrative in art, music, literature, and even history painting experienced a short, brilliant revival. In the resurgence of nationalism, narrative motives flourished everywhere. New Deal murals, the music of Aaron Copeland, and the novels of John Steinbeck indicate the power and pervasiveness of the revival in the United States. The Second World War, however, confirmed the intellectual impact of the First and provided the final impetus for the domination of the new cultural values. Indeed, not until then did Modernism truly sweep the critical field and not until the fifties did the artistic products of this intellectual mode dominate our cultural vi-
The Nightly Binding of Ehrich Weiss (Houdini), 1980-82

David Carbone

Oil on canvas
32 x 40"
Courtesy of Claude Bernard Gallery
New York
sion, most brilliantly and evocatively in painting – Abstract Expressionism. Truly, the New York School demonstrated the full extent of the reaction against all the aesthetic judgements of the last century. Except for the multi-media happenings of the 1960s, art could go no further in the repudiation of the narrative and the disdain for content and subject matter.

What of popular taste in all this? On the one hand, if audiences no longer understood or appreciated either the art works or the criticism, that actually tended to confirm the new aesthetic within Modernist assumptions: Art was supposed to be difficult of its nature; if too many understood it too easily, it could not be genuine. Popularity virtually guaranteed a negative reaction within this dominant mode of thought. Indeed, within the Modernist sensibility, the old virtues of the narrative in painting, literature and history became the very mark of reaction, backwardness, and provincialism – proof in themselves of failure and inadequacy. One notable consequence became enormous social, intellectual, cultural, and even political polarity over the nature of the aesthetic enterprise. Content and narrative proved the continental divide between them. People liked Andrew Wyeth and Norman Rockwell for the very reasons that critics despised them. They were merely illustrators; they were simplistic; they played to the masses. They charged old stories with new life; they practiced craftsmanship; people responded to their verities. The categories of judgment – the categorical judgments – still govern the way we see the world.

What is the meaning of a return to figurative, narrative art in the strong wake of Modernism? What is the content of the narrative told? This exhibit demonstrates some of those trends or potentialities. In the first place, Modernism has changed the way we see the world. It permanently altered relationships between artist, subject, artwork, critic, and society. The new narrative does not return unchanged even to the old subjects, much less to the old ideology that raises narrative as a fundamental value in art. The world is less ordered than it was in 1900. The narratives are less clear. Meaning is more opaque, relations more tentative. Our sense of things is darker, our inclination towards pessimism higher. Cheer and ebullience, for most, come harder. Whimsey, irony, and paradox still describe these motives, and they influence even a new, emerging aesthetic of the narrative in painting, and in our culture, too. Skepticism of government and politics remains profound and casts a pall over the precepts of the collective narrative. Yet this very skepticism provides a subject and a moral for late twen-
The Misunderstanding, 1986
Beth Foley

Oil on masonite
18 X 24”
Courtesy of Collection of Brian Hauptli and Norman Francis
San Francisco, CA
tieth century stories. The disharmonies between religion and the arts
remain profound, as well, and complicate the retelling of those tales
that illuminated the Western experience for 2000 years. Genre remains:
the telling of the stories of everyday life. That is where the show begins.

Dr. Darden Pyron, author and Associate Professor of History and American Studies at
Florida International University, Miami.

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Reflections on Narrative

John Hollander

When Chardin audaciously and triumphantly overturned the hierar-
chy of genres in the eighteenth century, he displaced history-painting
and even anecdotal genre-scene with his heroically meditative world of
still-life. It was almost as if this were a mandating parable for French
modernism, which has left all serious subsequent painting with the
permanent legacy of responsibility to structural truth and spatial fic-
tion, rather than to a mere faith in rendering observed object so as to
become pictorial subject. The stories told in still-life, landscape or in
related formats of various abstract modes receded, with and subse-
quent to Cezanne, into the realm of parable. In the 1790's, Wordsworth
and Coleridge's new poetic agenda made occasional verse of the public
kind irrelevant to true poetry, and sanctified moments of intense con-
sciousness, of what M. H. Abrams called "natural supernaturalism"—
more heroic than any victory in battle. Just so did working plein-air
make the inauthentic light of anecdotal, illustrative painting in later
nineteenth-century English and German art seem something to be
shunned, like a sort of imaginative darkness. The revision of the con-
cept of pictorial unity occasioned by cubism was acknowledged by
William Carlos Williams in 1923: "The rose is obsolete / but each
petal ends in / an edge, the double facets / cementing the grooved / col-
umns of air..." The wholeness of the painting as an invented structure
became the only honorable response to the sense of unity of a scene,
set-up, object, human body or group of figures in the painter's eye. Just
so with the most literary and putatively illustrative corners of modern-
ist art—surrealist painting; what literary critics have recently called
the narratology of familiar or ad hoc pictorial scenes was as radically
Baptismal Dismal, 1987
James Gingerich

Oil on paper
60 x 77"  
Courtesy of The Prudential Insurance Company, Newark, New Jersey
revised as were conventions of objective integrity in still-life and landscape.

The vast historical repertory of ways of representing chronological sequence, cause and effect, human inner states, expanding areas of significance of discrete events was systematically affronted. A programmatic irrationality, committed to some deeper psychological "truth", manifested itself in a turn toward emblematic assemblages, structures of signs with more in common with mythographic prints of the Renaissance than with nineteenth-century narrative painting. The rhetorical strategy of modernist apologetics was to consign pictorial narrative to the bell of sentimentality (while falsely—as with most modernisms since the first, Hellenistic, one, claiming as its own invention revisionary stance, irony and allusiveness). Narrative painting in America from World War II on often remained vulnerable to such a charge. In general, figure-painting which seemed totally to avoid the questions raised by abstract art almost always appeared to be avoiding the matter of art itself.

But if modern art gained from the rejection of narrative, its return to aesthetic centrality now seems to have been almost inevitable. Figurative painting which grew out of the searches and explorations of abstract art had to survive the storms of stylistic fashion that have shaken the places of serious painting for the last quarter century. The purported "avant-gardes" became during these years empty of interest for the peculiarly a-historical history of the imagination. For a small number of painters, both figurative and abstract, steering a personal course through the bowling winds of -isms was much like the heroic quests of French painting in the previous century. The barricades had, as we know, become the salon. More interestingly, even satirical impulses—the thrusts of savage indignation with which moral outrage (rather than vulgar, fashionable, easy political gesturing) makes its mark in the world—lost force and point. The engines of mockery became unwittingly weak affirmations of apathy and emptiness. Easy, superficial sarcasm—the sarcasm of the ignorant and the terrified— is today called "irony", and such trivialized and rusted irony itself is our contemporary form of sentimentality.

But the private, often obscure (as the real "advance guard" frequently is), heroic pursuit of the ways of picturing has inevitably had to confront the matter of narrative at last. With the history of modern art behind it as a sort of classical period—not to be rejected, nor literally followed, but metaphorically affirmed—contemporary painting can no longer avoid stories like the plague. There are generic conse-
Interrogations (I), 1980-81
Leon Golub

Acrylic on canvas
120 x 176"
Courtesy of The Eli Broad Family Foundation
Los Angeles, CA
quences of a painting including more than one figure in anything other than a conventionalized emblematic structural relation (e.g. couples, pairs, antithetical doubles like Mutt and Jeff, the Don and Sancho, the tall, attenuated, skyward one and the squat, grounded one, etc.). These have begun to emerge as a crucial realm. It is as if narrative, purged of the inauthenticity of the false heroic, the older sententialities, the outworn nostalgias, of depiction, could challenge painting again. Now that the parabolic “stories” of, say, pushing and pulling in space, of the mutual delineation of figure and surroundings, of revised formal semantics, have been inscribed in artistic conscience, they are no longer antagonistic to, but rather part of, the framing of what are more literally narratives.

In late modernity, generic realms have of course become more problematic than ever, and perhaps at this point one should raise some questions about what the very term “narrative” might mean. An illustration of a scene from a canonical story, obviously, but possessed of varying degrees of illustrative imagination (so that even the paradigm for representing a known scene or moment might be present, adduced, pointedly rejected or ignored). A fragment of written narrative—biblical, historical, proverbial, novelistic, dramatic, folkloristic—or perhaps a conspectus or capriccio of a number of scenes or paradigms. The second case is of more interest for contemporary narrative, since it affords room for the invention of pictorial tropes of sequence. Pictorial structure is now such a central aesthetic matter that the accommodation of narrative legibility to the demands of abstract, rather than representational, credibility is itself a mode of story-telling. In all modern fictions, stories become more “about” life the more they are correspondingly “about” their own way of being told, and ut pictura— as always—poesis.

Victorian English narrative painting frequently illustrates texts that are not less recoverable from the pictorial scene for never having been written. We might call this sort of painting virtual illustration. The Last Day in the Old Home in the Tate Gallery by R.B. Martineau, a pupil of Holman Hunt, invites the reader of the painting to reconstruct from the deployment of father and son, mother and daughter, mother-in-law and house-agent, the story of drink, gambling and irresponsibility even unto the next generation that have resulted in the sale of the old family seat. But the crowded, fussy interior in which this occurs is merely a format for the display and uninteresting connection of events. Almost any de Hooch, with its rooms opening onto and into other rooms, presents far more of a matter for modern
The Broken Home, 1983-84
Mark Greenwold

Gouache on paper
6 x 11-1/2"
Private Collection, CN
Southwest Pieta, 1988
Luis Jimenez

Prismacolor pencil on paper
59 3/4 x 48 1/4”
Courtesy of Adair Margo Gallery
El Paso, Texas
The House of Death and Life, 1984-85

Gabriel Laderman

Oil on canvas
93 x 135"

Courtesy of Jessica Darraby Gallery
Los Angeles, CA
narrative (consider the question of ancillary spaces in even a pointedly non-narrative Hopper, for example, as metaphors for memory or thought). Even the most elementary sense of "narrative" as denoting the presentation of a moment in a story previously known, or as in Holman Hunt's The Awakening Conscience, virtual and to be decoded, detail by detail (including significant inscription and allusive emblem) could today be enriched by the presence of modern visual technologies which have altered our sense of picture as well as the givens of things seen. Consider plate-glass, for example, its transparency always being made somehow contingent upon reflectiveness, so that two levels of image can co-exist, commenting upon and revising one another: Or camera-stopped action, pathological lenses, magnifications, even the frequently totally abstract (because never observable dal vero) configurations in a freeze-frame, and so forth. All these demand as much attention of the contemporary painter as the rest of nature always has, and along with the ancient wisdom of Matisse and Braque, or the great modern teaching of Giacometti, Balibus or Morandi.

All of these and more are at issue, for example, in the excitingly original pictorial space of Robert Birmelin's street scenes, whose poetic allusion to the camera lens as a sort of fish-eyed picture plane forces the very relations of fore-and-background, or illustrative close and middle-distance, into profound and fruitful revision. The crowding of foreground space and the alternative to perspective system keyed in by the yellow line of interdicted parking along the curb which aims at the yellow bit of taxi in the distance—these establish a unique point of view neither startled by, nor numbed to, a moment of growing urban violence in Birmelin's "On the Street: Gesture and Response." The painting's own gestures in response to those of the personages in its glimpsed story are the authentications of an art that transcends the sensational journalism of modern agitprop, or the aspiringly heroic humdrum of gauchiste mural. The precise frozen moment, the framing and cropping, the complex foreground structure of various limbs, all propound the complex story of what the painting knows and feels about the moment of city ordinariness it reveals. The false, bad-faith engagement in agitated action exemplified in film by the interjected use of hand-held camera or, conversely in prints by the equally false distance of the topographical view—Birmelin's sophisticated avoidance of either of these reductive extremes of engagement and aloofness is as much a part of his story as of his story-telling. As always, painting is in advance of photography, here, by being able to allude to some of the
Copley's Nightmare, 1975
Alfred Leslie

Oil on canvas
6 x 9"
Courtesy of Oil & Steel Gallery
Long Island City, NY
latter’s modes of narration and to contain them (even as, for example, writing and inscription of various sorts can be contained by painting).

The whole question of narrative space in its relation to the fictive space of—and in—painting is a central one. In pre-modern art, the relations of format to sequentiality were fascinatingly varied: polyptychs; mural sequences (some of the standard paradigms for deployment of sequential frescoed scenes in fifteenth-century Italian architectural spaces are interestingly mapped in a forthcoming study by Marilyn Lavin); the chronological capriccio of tapestry scene; the frame format of the comic-strip; triumphal forms and parade-like arrays; the relations of staging, narrating and painting which Martin Meisel has studied so profoundly in his Realizations. But once the interior and the landscape as pictorial formats in which one or more fictional events are clearly defined (and I include actual ‘‘historical’’ moments—for modernity, history painting is quintessentially and basely narrative) has been abandoned, then the invention of other sorts of format becomes an essential aspect of design (in both its sense of imagination and representation). Possible other spatial metaphors of sequence can be derived from our linguistic symbolism of UP/DOWN, INSIDE/OUTSIDE (as IMPLICIT/EXPLICIT, for instance) or scalar matters of the sort that Magritte made central to uncanniness. Or consider the mapping of Antecedent and Consequent: instead of something like A→C or A/C, or some analytic tryptych or [PAST/PRESENT/FUTURE] (or, indeed, [PAST/PRESENT I/PRESENT II] in the celebrated group of three paintings by Augustus Leopold Egg), let us imagine a configuration of as an Antecedent pregnant with an implicit Consequence. (Such a format would itself be emblematic, of course). Or take James McGarrell’s large-scaled scene of the act of painting itself. It employs the ancillary panels of early Italian altarpieces to frame its pictorialized ‘‘spots’’ of near distance. These become—with respect to the central anecdote—events, rather than merely scenes. They are bits of vision, both internal and external to the studio, parts of the total act and scene of painting, rather than merely consequences of it. (In the shorthand used above, the format would involve a strange kind of superimposition of A\[\]C –as if the scenes resulted from the process of painting—over a reversed C\[\]A –as if the scenes were elements of what was seen, and anterior to whatever would be on the easel). Lincoln Perry, another important contemporary narrative painter, has used ancillary panels in other complex and allusive ways.
Spots: Near Distance, 1984-85
James McGarrell

Oil on canvas
110 x 176”
Courtesy of Frumkin/Adams Gallery
New York
Of the intricate complexities of Gabriel Laderman’s masterful *The House of Death and Life* I have written at length elsewhere, but it should be observed here that the revision of the events in the Simenon novel which gives rise to it involves complex structural relations and spatial allusions within the cut-away, doll-house view of the six interior spaces both containing and in a sense generated by their variously alienated occupants. It is a painting in which *where* does not, as in trivial narrative, mean *when*, but whispers of *who, why* and all manner of *whos*. Like a good deal of contemporary narrative, Laderman’s painting is, despite its elusive and complex relation a published fiction, virtual illustration, in that reading it, construing its reasons and relations, involves the recovery of a dense parable having little to do with the actualities of the world of Inspector Maigret.

There are a host of other issues raised by the resurgence of narrative painting which there is no room to touch upon here, such as the ways in which landscape and still-life, the ghosts of which lurk behind so much abstract painting, re-emerge in a newly narrational context as fictive representations even without personages represented as human figures. Or the fascinating questions of figural groups—Ruskin never wrote of the taxonomies of collections of persons as he did of trees and clouds, and there is no section of *Modern Painters* called “The Truth of Crowds”, for example. In art, crowds, mobs, throngs, gangs, etc. are all concepts of structural as well as of narrational importance, involving the range of ways in which individuation is compromised, identity generalized, and will surrendered. The poetic ways of reconstituting allegory, as in both the figure paintings and the remarkable urban landscapes of Larry Day, and in the gestural grouping of figures by Leland Bell, are all relevant to a redeemed narrative art. Then, too, there are modern revisions of the notion of the anecdotal.

Modernity reflects the implicit *annales* histories of Flemish painting, where in W. H. Auden’s words “everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster.” Historic or other textual events become legitimized for painting by submergence in anecdotes of the ordinary. Late modernity goes even further and redeems the anecdote but turning away from it to the noble stories of construction, form, space, light, the reformation of Unity—those stories whose pure biblical form, as it were, occurs in the line from Cezanne through cubism to later abstraction. When every anecdote is incorporated into the heroic cycle of tales of painting, it loses triviality, sentimentality or even the reductions of caricature. Starting some years ago, Alfred Leslie seemed to be meditating upon the dramas of attentiveness and gaze, the groupings
Gypsy Caravan, 1987
Raoul Middleman

Oil on canvas
120 x 192"
Collection of the artist
of figures about startlingly-lit cynosures, in certain paintings of Joseph Wright of Derby, and when he turns to programmatically anecdotal depiction of a scene both historically and aesthetically significant for him as a painter, it is with a poetically allusive—rather than what bad popular daubers today would ignorantly call an “ironic”—consciousness. Certainly, the allusive dimension of the formal and coloristic vocabulary of David Carbone’s equally anecdotal painting (even more complex than Leslie’s, perhaps, in its possible allegories of the life of art), is not a matter of irony; and the pure exuberance of its play with figure and ground, with the rhetoric of proclamation, is wonderfully free of the uneasy vulgarities which mark so many recent incorporations of popular graphic material. Carbone’s recent painting, like Ronald Markman’s parts of his visionary painted and constructed world called “Mukfa”, keeps reminding us of how seriousness can easily be trapped in solemnity. It is quite possible that a good deal of inferior narrative painting, soon to be produced in response to the resurgence of a marketable genre, will consider itself to be taking some sort of ironic stance toward its own presuppositions. But this is unimportant: There are always reductively and trivially construed manufactures accompanying original explorations. The seriousness of painted groups of human figures creating and being created by, in and for, pictorial space; the imaginative richness of painting’s revisionary reconstruction of texts; the feasts provided for the mind in the eye and the eye of the mind—these are now coming available again to the intelligence and the love that mark true connoisseurship.

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Narrative Now

Jed Perl

What is narrative painting? There is no easy answer to this question, certainly not an answer of the sort we can give if asked, “What is still life painting?” or “What is landscape painting?” A narrative painting tells a story—that’s for sure. But of course a still life can tell a
In The Outfield, 1985
Daniel O’Sullivan

Oil on canvas
50 x 60"
Courtesy of Kraushaar Galleries
New York
story—of what people eat, for example—and so can a landscape. Abstract paintings tell stories, too. One could say a narrative painting tells a story through the dramatic interaction of several figures; but is the figure weeping alone in a room not a narrative? And what of one of Edward Hopper’s empty rooms? The contemporary artist may define narrative painting as something in the line of Poussin’s classical histories or Jan Steen’s public house genre scenes; but in almost every case the finished work arrives in our galleries as an example of a type of painting that modern art forgot. The modern mind balks at the neat categorization of painting into types of subject matter; and the idea of a contemporary narrative painting remains unsettled, often little more than a protest against the status quo.

Contemporary narrative painting is an aspect of postmodernism. And this, to my mind, is a problem. Postmodernism, a mass of assumptions and assertions, alternatively defensive and offensive, gives artists a cause, but not an inspiration. When I look at a contemporary painting of men in toga, I see behind it an artist who, as much as he is saying “yes” to Poussin, is saying “no” to Kandinsky and Matisse. Perhaps I exaggerate; but surely narrative, whether the setting is classical Greece or upscale suburbia, is an art that sets itself up in reaction to a great deal of modern art. This doesn’t have to be the case; but it seems that the less the artist insists on narrative as a reaction to modernism, the more contemporary narrative turns out to be an extension of modernism, turns into something other than the narrative we bear praised in the old Academies of England and France. The contemporary narrative painter, attempting to master systems of anatomy, perspective, and naturalistic representation, for which nothing in his background has prepared him, can begin to imagine that he’s set up a temple of reason in a world gone to ruin. This image has an appeal, though too often the temple turns out to face toward the past.

In a sense the contemporary narrative painter is proposing no more than the contemporary fiction writer has always taken for granted. Works of art, we’re being told, can represent fairly complicated relations between people. The new narrative painter, like the contemporary novelist, believes in the existence of an audience that looks to art for insights into life. Still, at the present moment literature seems more in touch with the audience’s needs than painting; the average educated person, whoever that might be, probably opens a novel more often than he goes into a gallery.

The history of the arts in modern times has brought us to this point.
The Visitation, 1985
Jim Peters

Oil on canvas, wood, tin and plexiglass
89-3/4 x 116 x 6"
Courtesy of CDS Gallery
New York
The nineteenth century was a great period of narrative—but in fiction, not in painting. While fiction, even in its most "advanced" forms, rarely gave up on the development of character, the visual arts have, for hundreds of years, been wary of psychology. The drama of nineteenth-century French painting, through which modern art invented itself, was a drama not of subject matter but of style. Why modern painting—which so often approaches the character of a lyric or a metaphor—mystifies the contemporary viewer is hard to say. Painting is now a specialized taste; some narrative painters would like to give painting the mass appeal of movies. The idea that artists must offer viewers something more than what Clement Greenberg called "the medium itself" is powerful—even commonplace—today; but it remains very difficult to answer needs in the audience that the audience itself may by now scarcely comprehend. In a period of aesthetic chaos, who's to say what's possible?

The contemporary narrative painter is an extremist. This isn't entirely his fault; American art has, since World War II, tended toward extremes. A narrative painter can resemble a minimalist painter in reverse—an artist driven to the farthest possible point in the politics of style. If history painting or genre painting as such has a political usefulness today, it's in setting up an extreme of what is possible, and in reminding us of how much has been excluded. But many narrative painters, by declaring themselves utterly outside of the idea of a modern art, leave too little room to maneuver. A lesson that narrative painters could perhaps learn from contemporary fiction writers is that modernism and a good story aren't irreconcilable. Cynthia Ozick, among others, gives us both simultaneously.

The framed moment of Western easel painting is a peculiar vehicle for narrative art; easel painting conveys the sense of an incident or an allegory more easily than a story. Giotto, the greatest narrative artist in the West, wasn't an easel painter at all. In the multiple panels of the wall decoration, a form going back to Byzantine times, Giotto found a structure capable of presenting a story line clearer and more compelling than anything known before—or after. Compared to Giotto's Arena Chapel and Saint Francis cycle, everything in later European art is a matter of fragments, privileged moments, exercises in personal style.

Through the unwinding of a series of scenes in the Arena Chapel, Giotto shows us how people change; he prefigures the effects of film. Certain of Giotto's scenes—Anna's prayer; the kiss of Joachim and Anna; the Flight into Egypt; the Mocking of Christ; the Crucifixion and
The Bricoleur's Daughter, 1987
Mark Tansey

Oil on canvas
68 x 67"
Courtesy of Emily Fisher Landau,
New York
the Lamentation—set a standard against which all storytelling painting must be measured. Raphael and Poussin, Rubens and Delacroix are, when judged by this standard, setting a mood more than they’re telling a story. They give the atmosphere in which events take place; but in a sense even Raphael is already too much the self-conscious modern, creating a painted world, ever to let the actors control events. Poussin’s Eliezer and Rebecca, a painting revered by generations of moderns, relates a story more through form sense than through dramatic sense. If this is narrative painting, so is Seurat’s Invitation to the Side Show. ‘We got off work, walked along the gas-lit boulevard, watched the side show, paid our money, went in...’

Perhaps the narrative impulse is always a realist impulse. It’s in Caravaggio and Rembrandt and De Hooch that we recognize again some of the clarity we know from Giotto. Only the realist can believe that a story unfolds. For both the classicist and the romantic all situations have already occurred.

The best narrative painting always speaks to common myths, shared experiences. Jacques-Louis David isn’t as great a painter as Poussin, and yet as a story-teller he’s sharper, clearer than Poussin. David’s art grows organically out of the revolutionary French history through which he lived and in which he played a part. Current events give The Death of Socrates and The Oath of the Horatii their relevance, their unequalled dramatic impulse. By comparison Poussin’s Death of Germanicus or Seven Sacraments are an intellectual’s dreams, the turning of an imagination, with little relation to the large world. Poussin—the foreigner passing his time amidst the connoisseurs in Rome, avoiding the blandishments of the French court back home—this is an example we should study very carefully.

Some contemporary artists want to regain for painting the relevance we know from David. The poverty and decay of our cities, the terrible events in South Africa and Central America would seem to demand it. And yet the contemporary artist, alone is his studio, cannot will himself into the center of events. Arriving there, at a spot where the journalist and the photographer long ago took up their posts, the painter looks inadequate, and even a little ridiculous. Apparently a painter will only be able to catch contemporary experience out of the corner of his eye, which throws the artist back into something personal, idiosyncratic—the opposite of narrative.

For a long time modern art itself could be read as an heroic story of the conquest of new pictorial worlds. Mondrian’s radical simplifications took the audience somewhere it had never been before; the pro-
Terminal, 1986-87

Jerome Witkin

Oil on linen
121 x 69"

Courtesy Sherry French Gallery
New York
gress of style was a great narrative. But this story is now finished, and so it’s not strange that in recent years art historians and some of the rest of us have been looking within painting from Matisse and Picasso to Klee and Kandinsky for a narrative impulse. We have less and less interest in knowing modern art in theory; more and more interest in knowing it empirically. And empirically, we can see that modern art does tell us about changes in male–female relations, the violence of the times, longings for utopia. Artists can go deeper into these areas; they seem to want to, in the visual arts, and in literature and the performing arts as well. Roland Barthes, before his death in 1980, was talking about wanting to write a “real” novel. The avant-garde public that twenty years ago willingly attended events in which little happened for minutes and even hours is now looking for development, drama, a plot. The avant-garde is suddenly enamored of Grand Opera, with its clear, legible plots. Much contemporary painting has too much plot, too much incident. In part, we’re just seeing the idiotic pendulum swing of fashion. Yet here and there something valuable comes out of it, or emerges along with it.

American art pretty much leads the world today; and American artists, in their experiments in narrative, as in everything else, have both the boldness and the obtuseness characteristic of those raised in a culture without longstanding traditions. It makes little difference whether an American painter sees narrative as embodying the concerns of the political left or the attitudes of some apolitical utopian ideal. What is almost inevitable is that the American will see narrative as the turning of a corner in the history of art, as something radically new or radically old. Even those who find some precedent in the past thirty or forty years—in Baltus, perhaps—see him as exceptional. The time has come for American artists to realize that Leger’s Construction Workers, Picasso’s Guernica and War and Peace Chapel, Matisse’s Stations of the Cross, Giacometti’s City Square, and Jean Helion’s street scenes, are attempts at something more or less like narrative. Why are these examples seen as irrelevant to the contemporary American? Probably because we believe that everything in the work of the European artist leads toward the aesthetic—toward art for art’s sake—while the American prides himself on constructing a story for a story’s sake from the ground up. The American would like to reconstruct the technique of figure composition that the European spent hundreds of years transforming and giving up. For the American artist storytelling is a moral triumph. Beware of moral triumphs. The American even finds it difficult to take to heart the lessons of Baltus,
who while committed to the world of a painting as logically self contained, has rarely found it within his powers to put more than two figures in a space at one time.

What we have in American narrative painting, at the present moment, is polemical protests lodged from the left, idylls of middle class life, reports from the chaotic cities, utopian dreams, and ironic comments on all of the above. Among these are some few works of distinction; the rest is dross. But probably this is as it always is with any type of painting.

For myself, I believe less in narrative painting as an idea today than I did fifteen years ago, when less of it had been done. There was a tendency, in the late sixties and early seventies, to give certain artists the benefit of the doubt, and look upon the painting hanging on the wall as a blueprint, a promise of more to come. More came, but with a few glorious exceptions, it hasn’t been better; Narrative painting has turned out to be salable, even popular. It has developed an ideology, and this ideology has become a glue holding together groups of artists. The narrative crowd is like other crowds. It has its gossip and arguments, its friendships and hierarchies. Catalogues, books, exhibitions have taken up the cause. But art really has no cause.

I have also noticed that many artists did their most interesting narrative work when their technique was least developed. Virtuosity, it seems, becomes at some point a defense against feeling. To bring the actors to life and set them on their way—this is the challenge the narrative painter confronts. Whether there are characters in the contemporary pictorial imagination strong enough to take our destiny into their hands—as the figures in Giotto, Caravaggio, and David once did—this is an open question. And another question. Even if there exists an artist capable of creating such figures, is there any longer an audience that is willing to believe in a painted hero?

Mr. Jed Perl, art critic for The New Criterion, contributor to The New Republic and to Art In America, has also taught at The Parsons School of Design (C.U.N.Y.).
**Artist’s Biographies**

**Philip Ayers**

*Born* 1948, Georgia  
*Education* 1976, Rutgers University, M.F.A.; 1973, Massachusetts College of Art, B.F.A.; 1972, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.  
*Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions* 1987, Koplin Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; 1986, Semaphore Gallery, NY; 1976, Douglass College.  

**Robert Birmelin**


**Jim Butler**

*Born* 1956, Massachusetts  
*Education* 1978-80, Indiana University, M.F.A.; 1979, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture; 1977, Yale at Norfolk Summer School of Painting; 1974-78, Rhode Island School of Design, B.F.A.  
*Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions* 1986, Chaffee Art Center, Rutland, Vermont; Tibor De Nagy Gallery, New York; 1984, Coburn Gallery of Art, University of Vermont; Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.  

**David Carbone**

*Born* New York  

**Beth Foley**

*Born* 1951, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
James Gingerich
Born 1952, Waco, Texas
Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions
Selected Recent Group Exhibition

Leon Golub
Born 1922 Chicago
Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions

Mark Greenwold
Born 1942
Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions
Selected Recent Group Exhibitions

Luis A. Jimenez, Jr.
Born 1940
Education Assistant to Seymour Lipton, NYC; 1964, Ciudad Universitaria, Mexico, D.F.; 1964, University of Texas, (Art and Architecture) B.S.
Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions
Selected Recent Group Exhibitions

Gabriel Laderman
Born 1929, New York
Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions
Alfred Leslie  
**Born** 1927, Bronx, New York  
**Education** New York University; The Art Students League  
**Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions**  
**Selected Recent Group Exhibitions**  

James McGarrell  
**Born** 1930, Indiana  
**Education** University of California, M.A.; Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture; Indiana U., B.A.  
**Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions**  
**Selected Recent Group Exhibitions**  

Raoul Middleman  
**Education** 1960, Barnes Foundation; 1960, Skowhegan Summer School; 1957-61, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; 1955, Johns Hopkins University, B.F.A.  
**Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions**  
**Selected Recent Group Exhibitions**  

Daniel O'Sullivan  
**Born** 1940, New York  
**Education** Brooklyn Museum of Art; Fordham University  
**Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions**  
**Selected Recent Group Exhibitions**  

Jim Peters  
**Born** 1945 Syracuse, New York  
**Education** 1977, Maryland Institute, College of Art, Baltimore, Maryland; 1969, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, M.S. Nuclear Engineering; 1967, U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, B.S.
Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions

Selected Recent Group Exhibitions

Mark Tansey
Born 1949 San Jose, California

Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions

Selected Recent Group Exhibitions

Jerome Witkin
Education Cooper Union School of Art, New York; Berlin Academy, West Berlin, West Germany; B.F.A., University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions

Selected Recent Group Exhibitions

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