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ART  
**Jonathan Gardner**

Chicago native Jonathan Gardner, 33, makes lush, highly stylized paintings rife with art-historical references that recall René Magritte and Fernand Léger. In *Studio Life*, 2014, for example, two women are in repose on a gridlike floor, one topless and savoring a cigarette, the other in patterned shorts and thigh-high stockings. One of a number of young artists reinventing figuration to connect with their own time (his *Sculpture by the Sea*, 2015, is above), Gardner (above), who recently moved to New York, has been on a hot streak following his 2014 solo show at Mary Mary gallery, in Glasgow, Scotland, and his inclusion in “Unrealism”, the contemporary figurative-painting exhibition put on by gallerists Jeffrey Deitch and Larry Gagosian during Art Basel Miami Beach. Next up is a highly anticipated New York solo debut, at Casey Kaplan in September. “Right now, I’m considering the geometry of a pictorial space through the presence of objects rather than figures,” he says.

- D.S.



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# UNREALISM

*Unrealism* celebrates the new revival of interest in figurative painting and sculpture. It features the work of some of the strongest and most original figurative artists from the 1980s generation to the present, focusing on current work. After a decade when conceptually based abstraction dominated the art dialogue, an exciting new group of figurative painters and sculptors has emerged, who are also generating renewed interest in innovative figurative artists from previous generations.

Figuration is perhaps the oldest art form, but it is continually evolving, reflecting contemporary concepts of human identity. Figurative art responds to technical innovations like printing, photography, and digital reproduction, but the ancient craft of rendering the figure renews itself with each generation. The artists featured in *Unrealism* work within the figurative canon without becoming academic. They are able to make the most venerable tradition in art look fresh and contemporary.

*Unrealism* is being organized by Jeffrey Deitch and Gagosian Gallery in collaboration with the artists' gallery representatives. The exhibition will take place in the Moore Building, also the current home of the ICA Miami, in the Miami Design District. It will occupy a multi-level 20,000 square foot space.

The exhibition will open on Tuesday, December 1st, during the day prior to the opening of Art Basel Miami Beach. The exhibition will remain on view during the art fair week.

*Unrealism* is a selling exhibition but will also include loans from artists and from private collections.

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## Go Figure! An Unfashionable Art Trend Makes a Comeback

Paintings of people and things are all the rage—again.

April 15, 2016 9:00 AM | by Fan Zhong

Figurative painting, it seems, is destined to be contemporary art's perennial sidepiece: always available for a fling, never for very long. The last time one could admit to a passion for it without committing social suicide in the art world was probably around 2003, when the painter John Currin had his midcareer survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in New York. Currin, known for injecting new ideas into age-old images of the body, was handsome, successful, and youthful. His peers were also of the moment: Elizabeth Peyton palled around with Marc Jacobs, and George Condo bedeviled collectors with lewd portraiture. The year before Currin's retrospective, an exhibition curated by Alison Gingeras at the Centre Pompidou, in Paris, "Dear Painter, Paint Me... Painting the Figure Since Late Picabia," had opened to acclaim. As the critic Roberta Smith observed in *The New York Times*, "reports of painting's death have been exaggerated for about 30 years."

When you've been around as long as Titian, you're in perpetual danger of falling out of fashion—especially after Picasso depicted the body in a manner that eventually dispensed with realism, making way for abstract art. Even Gingeras admits that she had to get over her own prejudice. When the curator was cutting her teeth in the Whitney's Independent Study Program, she recalls, there was hissing around the water cooler when the Museum of Modern Art put on a three-person show, in 1997, featuring Currin, Peyton, and Luc Tuymans, whose stylistic sensibility was considered reactionary. "People just could not get over it," Gingeras says with deadly seriousness. "It was not okay to like it."

But now, just like that, the human figure is okay again. After MoMA PS1 opened its "Greater New York" quinquennial last fall with a noticeable crop of talented young figurative artists, the website Artspace exulted: "The figure is back, baby!" Four days later, during the Frieze Art Fair, in London, *The New York Times* trumpeted: "The Triumphant Return of Figurative Art." And in December, during Art Basel Miami Beach, the über-dealers Jeffrey Deitch and Larry Gagosian joined forces to put on a splashy, market-friendly show of figurative painting and sculpture. Titled "Unrealism," it featured both old hands such as Marlene Dumas and rising stars like Mira Dancy, known for reinvigorating the female nude with electric colors and a feminist gaze.

So what does the art world suddenly see in that most basic idea, paintings of people? It could be a simple case of absence making the heart grow fonder. "It's bizarre," says Deitch, the former director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, who has reopened his New York gallery in SoHo. "There are always good figurative painters, but tell me, when was the last time you saw a great survey of figurative painting in an American museum?"

When Deitch first arrived at MOCA, in 2010, he was intent on staging two major surveys: One was of figurative painting, and the other, of abstract painting. Only the latter—"The Painting Factory: Abstraction After Warhol"—was realized. "I decided to do that first because the big, new exciting thing was all this achievement in abstraction," he says.



Jonathan Gardner's *Doubles*, 2015.

Build a major museum show and the copycats will follow. The innovations in—and, of course, the bullish market for—this wave of abstract painting, including the works of Wade Guyton, whose huge “paintings” are extruded from ink-jet printers, led to an outpouring of derivative “process-based” art (Look, I spray-painted this canvas with a fire extinguisher!). Dully handsome and all too plentiful, such collector bait has inspired a lot of colorful nicknames—“crapstraction” is a personal favorite—but the most enduring has been “zombie formalism,” coined by the artist and writer Walter Robinson (who, it must be said, is known for his figurative paintings).

“The body in crisis is increasingly present in our daily lives,” notes MoMA PS1 curator and associate director Peter Eleey, who headed up the “Greater New York” 2015 curatorial team. “Whether it’s in reference to the refugee situation”—he didn’t specify which one, but there are plenty—“or the way the media is processing Black Lives Matter, abstraction has been comfortable—for us. But it doesn’t give shape to the discomforts and questions that I think a lot of us are grappling with.” Deitch seconds that, adding, “This is not a time when a ponderous Mark Rothko painting about myth is relevant.” He ventures that figurative painting allows for more-diverse cultural content—clothing, skin color, setting—than abstraction ever can.

This seems logical and could explain the swift rise of, say, Jonas Wood, 39, whose intense inspection of the textures and colors of his domestic life with his wife, the ceramist Shio Kusaka, reads like memoir. But when I propose the idea to the Los Angeles painter Njideka Akunyili Crosby, 33, whose work borrows heavily from everyday life in Enugu, Nigeria, where she grew up, she hesitates. “I’m just wary of pitting abstraction and figurativism against each other,” she says. “When I started out, people were like, ‘Why are you doing figurative painting? It’s over.’ But instead of abandoning it, it became a new challenge: How do I make it relevant now?”

In her work, Akunyili Crosby, who has had a solo show at L.A.’s Hammer Museum, is introducing foreign elements—like the patterns from Nigerian textiles—into a familiar mode of painting (she’s inspired by 17th-century Spanish painters like Diego Velázquez). “Now there’s greater freedom not just in the way a work looks, but in terms of ideology,” Gingeras says. “One can borrow from a host of sources. Everything’s legitimate.”

Take fashion illustration, which, until emerging stars like Ella Kruglyanskaya, 37, reimagined it, was considered, at best, art-adjacent. When I visit Caitlin Keogh at her studio in Brooklyn one morning, she is rushing to complete one of her exquisitely feminine paintings that recall fashion illustration of the 1930s, when Surrealists like Salvador Dalí and Jean Cocteau were proudly practicing it. At 34, Keogh is coming into her own: She had a breakout solo show at megadealer Mary Boone’s midtown Manhattan gallery last year and was part of a well-reviewed group exhibition, “Flatlands,” at the Whitney this year. She pauses from her work to tell me a story from when she was in art school, at Cooper Union: One day an instructor brought in a famous Cecil Beaton Vogue story in which models are posing in front of Jackson Pollock paintings. It was presented to the class as shameful—high Abstraction being dragged through the muck of commercial figuration. Softly, with conviction, Keogh says, “That struck me as false.”

And when I drop in for a chat with Jamian Juliano-Villani, 29, I manage to fill pages of my notebook just listing all the strange and wonderful references she has placed in her dense paintings as freely as if they were clip art: Jean-Michel Basquiat; Lamb Chop; “Frank Sinatra’s art book”; Asterix; The Art of the Puppet, by Bil Baird; “bread people”; Will Eisner; “that John Cleese commercial”; and so on. “Someone looks at a painting now, it’s only for three or four seconds,” Juliano-Villani says. “Which is nothing. So I’m going to give them some shit to look at.” While she doesn’t agree with the notion that artists today are tailoring their work to the aesthetic demands of Instagram, her figures floating in flat space can appear as though they have been Photoshopped.

The flattening of the figure—“Flatlands,” which latched onto this, also featured Juliano-Villani’s work—is a product of the way we see today. “I’m really interested in that idea right now,” says Jonathan Gardner, 33, whose smoothly stylish scenes of figures at leisure look flat but possess a deceptive, trompe l’oeil depth, bringing to mind the work of Fernand Léger.

Even if common wisdom holds that the more flat and graphic a painting looks, the more “likes” it will get, there are notable exceptions: Until three years ago, Genieve Figgis, 43, was toiling away in a small town in Ireland, producing ghoulish costume dramas with a dreamy, blurred look that resulted from pushing thick paint around a canvas. “The past 12 years, I’ve just been hearing feedback from my family: ‘You’re crazy, you’re insane, you’ll be locked up!’” she admits, laughing. “That’s why I put the work on social media, to see what would happen if other people saw it.” Richard Prince discovered her on Twitter in 2013, and since then, Figgis has had major solo shows in New York and London.

Because the art world has a short memory, it can be helpful to point out that some artists who have lately become hot commodities have actually been making similar work for years. The painter Brian Calvin, 46, for instance, whose portraits of alluring slacker girls are currently in high demand, had been mining that vein long before Gingeras included him in “Dear Painter” in 2002.

It’s a lesson that seems to demand relearning every few years: For all the talk of figurative painting’s death in the face of technology and newer movements, the human body will never cease to fascinate, nor will artists ever stop tinkering with it. The body, Keogh told me, “is the site of affect.” Roughly translated from artspeak, it means, Get the body involved, and people will react. Gingeras, who is contemplating a sequel to her Pompidou show, heartily agrees: “Figurative painting can be populist—you know, your mom can like it. But that can also be its locus of transgression.”

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# ARTNEWS

## CASEY KAPLAN NOW REPRESENTS JONATHAN GARDNER

BY Andrew Russeth

Jonathan Gardner, whose lush, richly colored, cartoon-inflected paintings abound with beautiful ladies (who are quite often topless), elegant patterns, and art-historical references, is now represented by Casey Kaplan in New York.

A representative for the gallery, which is based in Manhattan's Flower District, said that Kaplan first came across the work in 2014 and that they will host a solo show by Gardner in September 2016. Gardner has had one-person outings at Mary Mary in Glasgow, in 2014, and Corbett vs. Dempsey in Chicago, in 2011 and 2013, and was one in a two-person exhibition with Vanessa Maltese at Nicelle Beauchene in New York earlier this year.

In June, Mary Mary brought a selection of the New York-based artist to the Liste art fair in Basel, where they received quite a bit of attention. Looking forward to this upcoming show!



Jonathan Gardner, *Sculpture by the Sea*, 2015.  
PHOTO: JEAN VONG/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND  
CASEY KAPLAN, NEW YORK

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## June: A Painting Show, Sadie Coles HQ, London

Jackie Wullschlager

*Show traces ways in which the human form is reconfigured within the decorative, the diagrammatic, in styles folding together disparate influences*



Jonathan Gardner's 'Interior Landscape' (2015)

An inspired, timely idea for a painting show: how the motif of the body persists and evolves as 21st-century painters abandon traditional figuration for non-realist idioms. Assembling work by emerging global artists, mostly in their thirties, the show traces ways in which the human form is reconfigured within the decorative, the diagrammatic, in styles folding together disparate influences, from pastoral to pop.

Chicago-based Jonathan Gardner's assured "Interior Landscape" reprises Modernist tropes — reclining woman in a studio interior with plants, window on the exterior, picture within a picture — in a flattened tableau in which elements are disjointed and rearranged as if by Photoshop. Iraq-born Ahmed Alsoudani presses teeming fragments against the picture surface to push alluring cut-and-paste compositions to the brink of indecipherability. Another Iraqi, Hayv Kahraman, adapts Persian miniatures and Arabic calligraphy into contemporary vignettes addressing the effects of war on women.

Filipino Rodel Tapaya's hallucinatory "Sound of the Healing Garden" collides figural and natural forms in an expansive all-over tapestry of bodies and objects — phallic-shaped plants, punkish and Gothic figures — to collapse pictorial space while playing with allusions from Bosch, Rousseau's faux-exoticism and Christian symbolism. And how to face the legacy of painting is the subject of Australian Helen Johnson's witty "Post-colonial Feminist Drama", where two blurry women confront a frieze of art-historical references.

Defining trends in 21st-century painting is an elusive quest. This bold attempt pinpoints the way artists express through the human figure some of the major tensions — coherence versus fragmentation, history versus immediacy — in contemporary art, and energetically celebrates its plurality.



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## Art in America

### Jonathan Gardner and Vanessa Maltese

at Nicelle Beauchene, through Jun. 28



Jonathan Gardner, *The Smokers*, 2015, oil on linen, 60 by 38 inches. Courtesy Nicelle Beauchene, New York.

Lookalikes of Marge Simpson's raspy-voiced sisters—or alternatively, the coy nudes of the Louvre's unsigned *Presumed Portrait of Gabrielle d'Estrées and Her Sister, the Duchess of Villars* (ca. 1594)—casually puff away in Jonathan Gardner's *The Smokers* (2015), faces obscured by nicotine clouds. The Léger-like women represent just one duo in an exhibition populated by doubles. Gardner's other paintings, of short-skirted tennis partners and layered faces peering out from behind a plate of fish, accompany Vanessa Maltese's geometric abstractions and undulating formica "backrest" sculptures, images of which make a cameo in her graphic paintings. Formal resonances between the artists' works underpin this feminine twinning, evoking the mysteries shared between pairs.

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# frieze

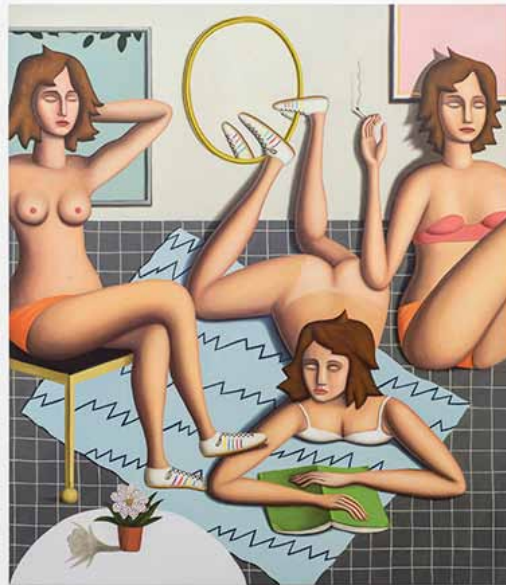
## Jonathan Gardner

Mary Mary, Glasgow, UK

The 17th century poet George Herbert is quoted as having said that 'living well is the best revenge', a piece of advice that came to mind whilst wandering through a recent exhibition of new paintings by Jonathan Gardner at Mary Mary.

Imagine being at the 1924 Salon des Indépendants at the Grand Palais in Paris and then finding yourself teleported to the future that is modern Glasgow. In this show of eight paintings, we encountered postures and conjunctions reminiscent of the great era of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse: an ear similar to the one sprouting from a eucalyptus tree in Joan Miró's *The Tilled Field* (1923–24); young women relaxing against gridded backgrounds with bare, geometric breasts, like those found in Fernand Léger's *The Three Women (Le Grand Déjeuner)* from 1921. The show's opener, *Inner Living* (2014), depicts the torso of a male figure that stands in front of a turquoise seascape, with a white-sailed yacht visible through a chiming triangular gap in his jacket. He wears a white belt and navy blue trousers; a yellow smiley button is pinned to the creased grey lapel. Who is he? Maybe he's a man living the good life, a man who really does think that living well is the best revenge. A man like that great forgotten painter of the Lost Generation – Gerald Murphy. Glamorous expatriates, Murphy and his wife Sara left New York and built Villa America near Antibes, on the French Riviera, in 1924, where their social circle included Ernest Hemingway, Picasso and Man Ray. Their close friend F. Scott Fitzgerald supposedly based the protagonists of his novel *Tender is the Night* (1934) on the couple.

In the texture of his pictorial taste, Gardner can be compared to Murphy. Gardner's work has a similar insouciance; a deft touch in the collage of objects. Like Murphy, he is an American painter responding – albeit at a remove of nearly a century – to the work of Picasso and Léger. Does that time lag matter? Probably not in the scheme of things – John Currin's updates of Lucas Cranach and Sanya Kantarovsky's Matissean evocations are only a couple of examples of the endless re-visitations that painting feeds on. Gardner also shares a tendency highlighted recently by Paul Teasdale in *frieze* ('What's so funny?', issue 167) for young painters to quote cartoons: is that Wilma Flintstone's bun hairdo in *The Rocks* (2014)? Gardner is attracted to details like an isolated slice of lemon or the pink band of Elastoplast on an ankle seen in *Torso Table* (2014) – what Calvin Tomkins, writing on Murphy in the *The New Yorker* in 1962 diagnosed as a 'style that lay midway between realism and abstraction, and an imagery that made use of commonplace objects presented in a bold manner'.



Zig Zag, 2014, oil on canvas, 1.5 x 1.3 m

Three women sit or lie on a patterned sky-blue mat in *Zig Zag* (2014): one topless, one tan-lined and bikini-bottom-less, one enjoying a cigarette, all with eyes closed. It is an image of unabashed, indulgent joy. The girls remind me of Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker, the languid pair in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), fresh from a game of tennis and luxuriating in a sultry afternoon, but now updated with flashy trainers. What is it with Gardner and footwear? Is he a more restrained Rudolf Schlichter or a more relaxed Bruno Schultz? Another canvas here is called *Superga* (2014) and features a girl wearing the eponymous pumps. Leather boots appear in *Torso Table*, *The Rocks* and *Wall Things* (all 2013). Similarly fetishistic are the contorted limbs of the figure in *The Rocks* that mirror the erotic imbroglio of Christina Ramberg's work. As a graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where Ramberg herself was a student in the late 1960s, it is perhaps unsurprising that Gardner seems indebted to the artist and the work of her fellow Chicago Imagists.

One of the trio of girls in *Zig Zag* has put her book down. Perhaps she is reading *Tender is the Night*. These three figures reappear as cartoon outlines in *Women in White* (2014), recalling Picasso's almost identically titled 1923 masterpiece. Then it clicks: the inspiration for Picasso's *Woman in White* was supposedly none other than Sara Murphy. Gardner's visions share the unalloyed optimism of the 1920s life the Murphys knew on the Côte d'Azur and, in their gentle hedonism, hint that such pleasures do not last.

- John Quin