

# Traditionalism Comes of Age

by Gail Leggio

Today's traditionalist painters may not get as much press as art-scene favorites like videographers, but they can count on support from ateliers, galleries, critics and collectors astute enough to appreciate them. They are less often dismissed as reactionary cranks or lumped in with the perennial substratum of easy-listening figurative artists, the kind that turn out facile, flattering portraits or still lifes and landscapes that function primarily as pleasant décor. There is more general recognition that the new traditionalists are engaging creatively with the past, not producing watered-down versions of old art, that the inherited genres are still vital, that craftsmanship has value. In the *New Yorker* (June 23, 2011), critic Adam Gopnik described, in a long, thoughtful essay, the difficult and satisfying process of learning how to draw from his friend Jacob Collins. Where is the movement, which seems solidly established, albeit still evolving, headed now? Exhibitions are a good way to take the pulse. One way we get to know paintings is by the company they keep.

Two recent gallery shows focused on the figure, which is the bedrock of both academic practice and the humanistic worldview. At the prestigious John Pence Gallery, in San Francisco, "Persons of Interest—Portraits and Figures" brought together thirty artists from the A-list of contemporary traditionalism. The figure-study genre looked strong: Jacob Collins's *Odalisque* (2009), Douglas Flynt's no-nonsense *Figure* (2010), Zack Zdrate's Caravaggesque *In the Light* (2010) and Juliette Aristides's meaty charcoal *James* (2011). Works on paper illustrated a wide range of techniques, from Aristides's smudgy gravitas to Noah Buchanan's precise graphite line in *Introspection* (2009), a profile portrait surrounded by botanical symbols, reminiscent of the German Romantic artist Philip Otto Runge. Edward Minoff's pencil-and-white-chalk *Blue Scarf* (2010) mixes rich detail, in the face and hands, with effectively rudimentary line, for the slender figure. Giving the selection some art historical ballast was the etching *Nudo #2* (1984) by Paul Cadmus, one of the twentieth century's indomitable proponents of figure and narrative in painting. "Persons of Interest" was on view March 16–April 11, 2012, at John Pence Gallery, 750 Post Street, San Francisco, California 94109. On the web at [www.johnpence.com](http://www.johnpence.com)

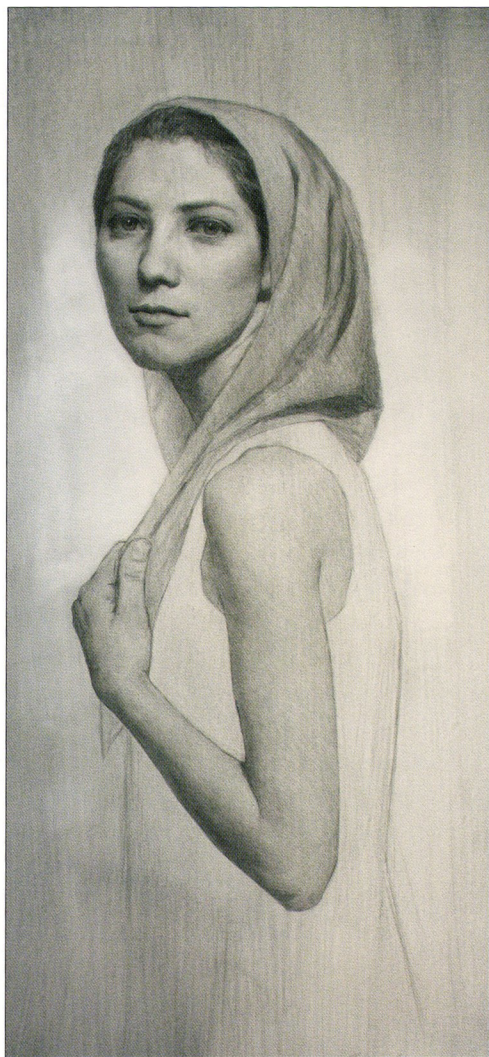
Some galleries gravitate toward artists with similar styles and/or sets of preoccupations. Eleanor Ettinger Gallery in New York City has a roster of painters who favor loose brushwork and scenes that invite narrative speculation. The gallery's fifteenth annual installment of "The Figure in American Art" came across as a solid anthology of visual short stories: *Dominated* (all works 2011–12), a brutal boxing match by Steve Huston; *Conversation*, a man in dialogue with his shadow by Zack Zdrate; *Man and Woman at Table*, an

Edward Minoff, *Blue Scarf*, 2010  
COURTESY JOHN PENCE GALLERY  
SAN FRANCISCO

uneasy encounter in a New York apartment by Hyeseung Marriage-Song. Marriage-Song deftly balances rectangles of neutral yet painterly wall and floor against glimpses of brighter, almost mosaic-like cityscape through the windows. Without falling into the trap of illustration, these artists combine human interest with formal sophistication. The exhibition was on view February 9–March 31, 2012, at Eleanor Ettinger Gallery, 24 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019. On the web at [www.eegallery.com](http://www.eegallery.com)

Artists who curate bring special qualifications to the job, notably an expertise born of hands-on knowledge of the working process. Objective overviews of a broad spectrum of work are valuable, but so are personal insights, choices based more or less explicitly on stylistic and temperamental affinities. Two recent exhibitions grew out of slightly but intriguingly different approaches.

Described as the first in an annual series of artist-curated shows, “Resolve,” at the Joshua Liner Gallery in New York City, featured twenty-five artists. The impressive line-up of contemporary realists included, not surprisingly, founders, instructors and graduates of the Water Street Atelier, Grand Central Academy of Art, New York Academy of Art, Ani Art Academy and Janus Collaborative School of Art. These institutions—along with others across the United States and a couple in Florence, Italy—have provided pedagogic scaffolding for the traditionalist movement. The new traditionalists have learned





a great deal from the nineteenth-century Beaux-Arts academy, especially an appreciation for the benefits of discipline. Artist-curator Tony Curanaj defines the word *resolve* in the context of his chosen artists' "determination" and "technical virtuosity," and calls them "masters of their craft." These contemporary artists seem to be flourishing under rigorous training, without becoming rigid. The loose network of ateliers has not hardened into a bureaucratic system, in the way that the old academy did, leading to the modernist rebellion. The work on display was refreshingly non-homogenous, perhaps reflecting the polyglot backstories of the artists themselves.

Tony Curanaj's own story is a good example. He was an influential figure in graffiti culture and worked as a head designer at Disney before joining Jacob Collins, first at the Water Street Atelier and now at the Grand Central Academy of Art. His tight-rendering painting style, he writes in his artist statement, is a commitment to "skill, precision and clarity in thought." Curanaj's *Nouveau Red* (2011) has a trompe l'oeil element in the shallow layering, over red Art Nouveau wallpaper, of wood, a playing card, an envelope and a handwritten note: the text reads, in part, "love of beauty is taste, creation of beauty is art." But the dead-center animal skull with massive curling horns adds unexpected physical impact to the decorative yet theatrical composition. Curanaj combines objects in an almost-occult suite of correspondences. Anthony Waichulis's *A Summer Affair* (2011), in contrast, is a classic trompe l'oeil imitation of a paper collage, with elements—a vacation snapshot, travel stamps, an ace of hearts playing card—that add up to an implied narrative.

Most of the works in the exhibitions are not so quickly related to Curanaj's aesthetic, including the mysterious *Interior III* (2009) by his friend Jacob Collins, a painting reminiscent of the Tonalist spaces of James McNeill Whistler and John Singer Sargent. Many of the artists Curanaj selected come from quirky backgrounds. Kris Kuksi, who grew up in rural isolation in the Midwest, has crafted his own highly eccentric worldview. He can paint, as the lovely *Portrait of an Iris* (2011) demonstrates, but his most original works are mixed media assemblages such as *The Surrender of Helios* (2011), a filigreed tangle inhabited by creatures sourced from model kits, toys and mechanized bits and pieces. Both Hieronymous Bosch and the mad Victorian fairy painter Richard Dadd come to mind as antecedents. Kuksi, who was featured in the 2009 "Steampunk" exhibition at Oxford University's Museum of the History of Science, had his own solo show, titled "Triumph," at the Joshua Liner Gallery (March 15–April 7, 2012).

Many of the artists featured in this show are friends and colleagues. The internationally trained Kate Lehman is married to another fine painter, Travis Schlatt. She is also a co-founder of the Janus Collaborative School of Art in New York City, along with Dan Thompson and Michael Grimaldi. Grimaldi's oil-and-tempera *Portrait of Trinette* (2011) is particularly striking, with a low-angle point of view and dramatic chiaroscuro that gives the contemporary red-haired

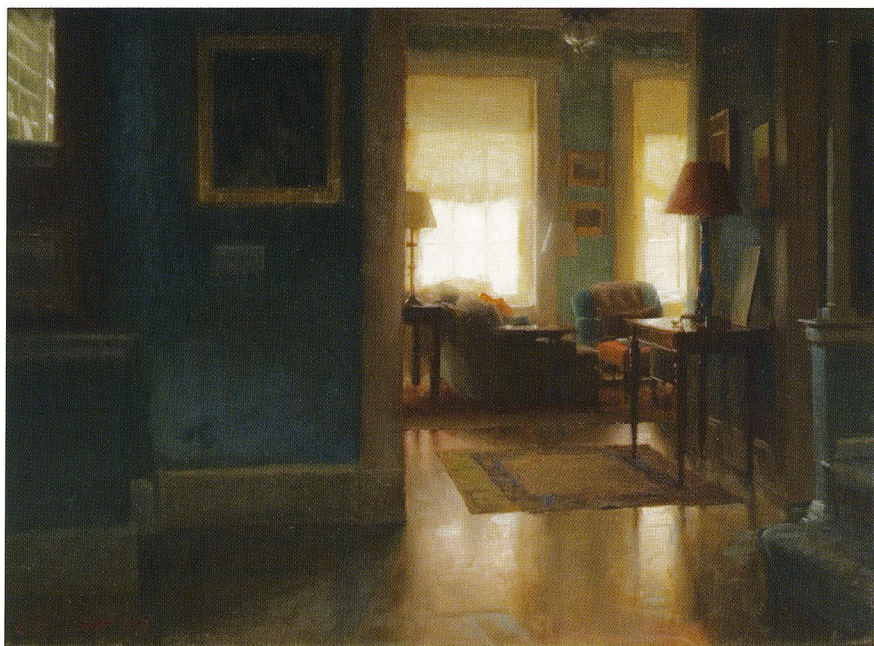
girl the aura of a Baroque saint. Interactions within groups of friends have always been a driving force in how art movements evolve. Curanaj presented a solid roster of established artists who, for all their stylistic differences, have reached a reasonable consensus on aesthetic fundamentals. But he included other work that suggests that the defining boundaries of contemporary realism may be porous. It was a good mix of setting clear goals and standards while remaining open to new ideas. “Resolve” was on view January 26–February 25, 2012, at the Joshua Liner Gallery, 548 West 28th Street, New York, New York 10001. On the web at [www.joshualinergallery.com](http://www.joshualinergallery.com)

A different group of contemporary realists was on view in “From What I Remember/From What I Forget,” at the Principle Gallery in Alexandria, Virginia. The show was curated by Broad Street Studio, a three-member artist group, and all the work reflected, in various ways, the ideas expressed in the studio’s mission statement. While honoring old master technique as the wellspring of craft, they take a quizzical attitude toward straightforward representation. According to the three artists, Jason John, Joshua Suda and Brian Martin, the painting “medium gives us the greatest ability to record the strange world we live in” and illuminates “the moments that deviate from the normal.” John’s *From What I Remember* (all works 2011) offers a good example of this sensibility. A girl sporting a big, thrown-together paper hat contemplates her own image in a mirror, a familiar trope of the painter’s art, the paradox of three-dimensional illusion in a two-dimensional space. Adding to the conceptual complexity, she stands in front of a stylized painting-within-a-painting, and the relative realism of that image is undermined by the fact that the fictive canvas is torn and sags, coming loose from its gilded frame. E.H. Gombrich might enjoy parsing this handsome visual essay on art and illusion.

Even with the portrait genre, these artists push beyond likeness and invite narrative speculation. In the words of the Broad Street Studio manifesto, “you may invent your own conclusion to this scenario.” Suda’s *A Moment of Clarity* depicts an ordinary-looking guy with thinning hair and a beard, but his startled expression is cosmically amplified by a pulsating nimbus, a New Age shorthand illustration for aura energy. A similarly unprepossessing individual is the subject of Adam Vinson’s *Revenant*. The title reminds us that we are not looking at a living person—a bald, middle-aged man with a goatee—but at an artistic ghost, in the agreed-upon convention of portraiture. Vinson underlines this point with trompe l’oeil effects: the portrait appears to be on crinkled paper, imperfectly smoothed out, a metaphor for the play of absence and presence in the vagaries of memory; the artist’s signature, “carved” into the simulated wood surface, seems comparatively permanent.

The curators of “From What I Remember” want us to think about the precarious balance between levels of reality, to think about—rather than simply accept—the useful fiction that underlies mimesis in the arts. Alyssa Monks depicts swimmers in, and through, water. In *Meghan* (study), a girl’s face breaks





Jacob Collins, *Interior III*, 2009

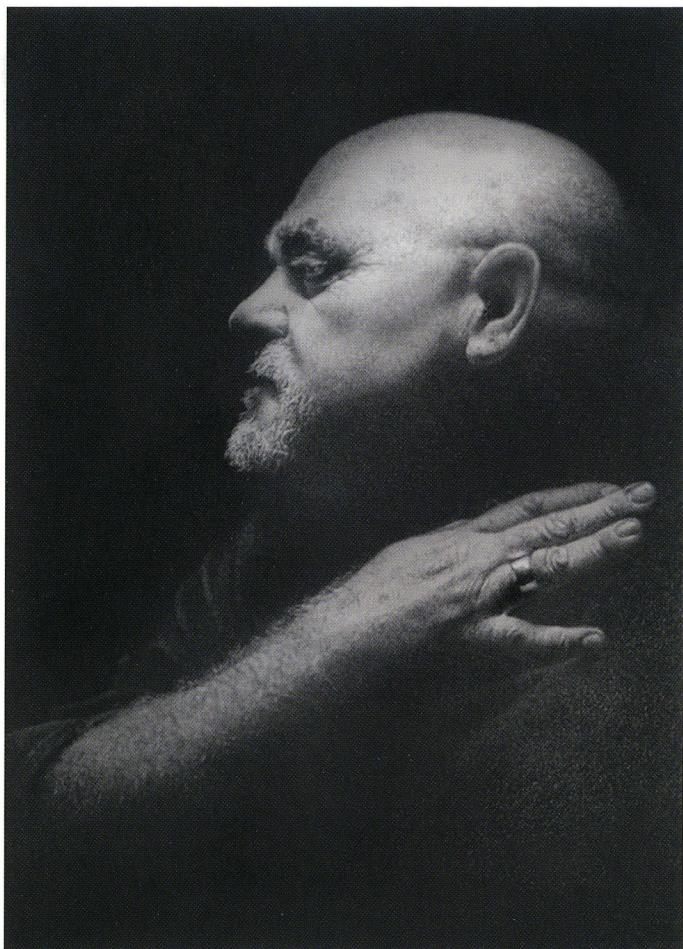
COURTESY JOSHUA LINER GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

the surface of the water, which is simultaneously the surface of the painting. Her dark hair swirls in the current; brushstrokes embody as well as represent sensuous movement. The translucency of water becomes a metaphor for oil paint, which never completely loses its viscosity, even when subordinated to the illusion of realism. Some works—Judith Peck’s *Triggered Memories*, an oil-and-plaster, cracked reddish portrait of a woman dimly perceived; Jay Davenport’s *Sweet Days Gone By*, a photorealist image of a candy jar, with one-cent and five-cent stickers pasted to the fictive glass of the painting’s surface—seem to have been selected largely because they reiterate the exhibition theme.

The show also provided a philosophical context for drawings. Armin Mersmann gave his graphite portrait of a heavy-set older man a poetic title, *Fifty-Four Trips around the Sun*. In the best tradition of realism, the artist finds beauty in sensitive observation, without stooping to flattery. The subject, in dramatic chiaroscuro, has both physical weight and emotional gravitas. At the same time, we are always aware that what we are looking at is a labyrinth of fine lines, especially alive in the texture of beard, eyelashes and arm hair. Sarah Petruziello’s draftsmanship is meticulous, but what she calls her “narrative portraiture” has an element of fantasy. She sets her elegant graphite curves against gold leaf, or the viewer’s eye is lost in a web of Lilliputian detail. Petruziello’s work is on view (February 3–May 20, 2012) in the exhibition “Alice: Into the Looking Glass,” at the Noyes Museum of Art, Stockton College, Oceanville,

Armin Mersmann  
*Fifty-Four Trips  
around the Sun, 2011*

COURTESY  
PRINCIPLE GALLERY  
ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA



New Jersey. "From What I Remember/From What I Forget" was on view January 20–February 21, 2012, at the Principle Gallery, 208 King Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314. On the web at [www.principlegallery.com](http://www.principlegallery.com)

Most of the artists in these group shows are part of a contemporary traditionalist mainstream. Twentieth-century figurative painters such as George Tooker, Paul Cadmus and the veteran, still-active Burton Silverman were relatively isolated, largely ignored by the fashionable art scene, and had to carve out a personal vision and a self-defined practice. Many of the current crop were born in the 1970s and hit a sweet spot, historically, benefiting from a support system that includes ateliers to teach them the discipline they craved and galleries with the foresight to give them an audience. There are other interesting artists, however, who may not subscribe to the tenets of what may be called—with a wide range of emphasis—classical realism. They are engaging with tradition in creative ways, although, for them, tradition may



include healthy doses of surrealism, naive or folk art and even modernism. Two painters recently seen in solo exhibitions are well worth bringing into the conversation.

“Mavis Smith: Hidden Realities,” at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, offered a substantial selection of works by an accomplished tempera painter. Tempera painting has occupied a specialized niche since the mid-twentieth-century revival of the medieval medium. Smith takes her place within an intergenerational confraternity of painters enamored of the process, which entails daily mixing of egg yolk with powdered pigments and, often, hundreds of translucent layers that yield luminous colors and a porcelain surface. Smith, who enjoys a thriving career as a children’s book illustrator, depicts calm, stylized figures, often young girls, in quiet interiors. The implicit scenarios suggest contemporary fairy tales, but the situations are open-ended. Spelling things out would break the mood. The girls all have distinctive almond-shaped eyes, like the early Italian madonnas of Simone Martini, and many of them are posed in front of flat decorative backdrops. The model in *Conch Girl* (2003)—the title refers to her necklace—is presented straight-on, the severe oval of her face strictly symmetrical against embossed blue-on-white wallpaper. In *Wallpaper* (2010), a stronger paisley-pattern backdrop sets off the features of a delicate blonde, with hair and eyebrows as fine as corn silk. The close-up framing—from forehead to just below the shoulders—strengthens the impact of her otherworldly gaze.



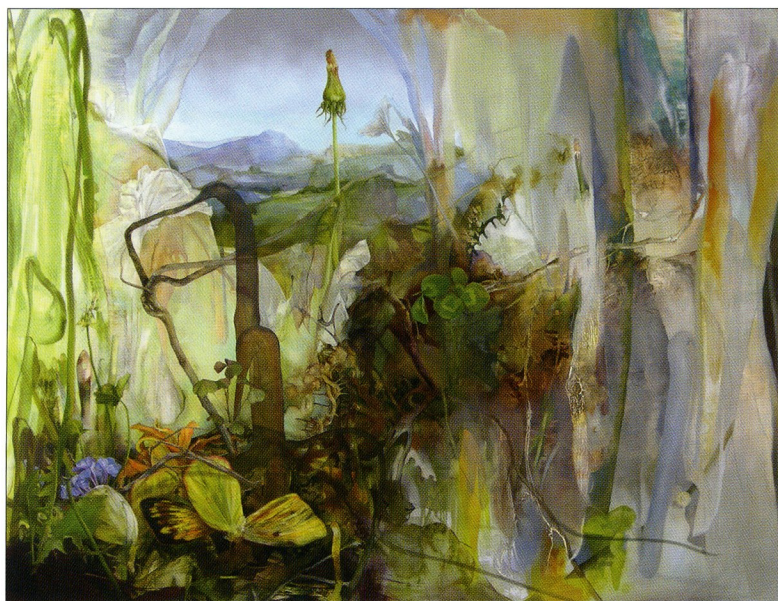
Mavis Smith, *Night Pool*, 2009

COURTESY JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM, DOYLESTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

Smith sets her subjects along a continuum between timeless and contemporary. *Night Pool* (2009) lies at the modern extreme. A girl dressed in jeans and T-shirt lies on a bed, her face half-buried in a red throw pillow. Behind her, a double-paned window reveals trees and a backyard pool. The way these very specific elements are arranged and the girl's sullen wariness make the painting look like a panel from a storyboarded film. In contrast, *Sylph* (2010) uses a stylized pool like an iconographic attribute. The young girl enigmatically gazing back at us is a mythic creature. Smith brings the same subtlety of finish to her drawings as she does to her tempera paintings. In the graphite-on-gesso *Branches* (n.d.), a blonde, seen in three-quarter figure, stands on the threshold between interior and landscape, leaning against the door frame and clutching three bare branches. Her situation is as mysterious as the play of light. "Mavis Smith: Hidden Realities" is on view January 14–May 20, 2012, at the James A. Michener Art Museum, 138 Pine Street, Doylestown, Pennsylvania 18901. On the web at [www.michenermuseum.org](http://www.michenermuseum.org)

Mavis Smith works within the venerable, well-defined tradition of tempera painting. Margaret Wall-Romana, whose solo exhibition, "Tangle and Sensation," is on view March 31–May 5, 2012, at George Billis Gallery in Los Angeles, is harder to pigeonhole. Her large-scale paintings reflect the in-the-moment spontaneous paint-handling of the Abstract Expressionists; she calls them "my first crush as a serious student." But she also cites the Hudson River School and the Flemish old master Rogier van der Weyden as influences. How does this unlikely mix of styles work out in practice? There are passages of exquisitely rendered botanical detail, but they emerge from areas of gestural painting, pours and scrapes. Wall-Romana describes the evolution of a painting "through accretions of images and processes layered on top of each other." The end result is a diaphanous palimpsest rather than a heavy, clotted surface, in the manner of many loaded-brush painters. In *Painting Painting (with van der Weyden)*, 2009, a patch of carefully observed jungle flora—blue and orange blossoms, green leaves, twisted thorns—emerges from the translucent effluvia of painterly overlaps. It's a big painting (5-by-6½ feet), and slightly disorienting, as if one of Martin Johnson Heade's hummingbird-and-orchid images were materializing out of thin air, or rather the fluid matter of oil paint. Perhaps the most striking work in the exhibition, *Parentheses (Here & There)*, 2007, has an unusual shape, a horizontal cross (5-by-7 feet), which reinforces the theme of spirituality in nature embraced by the Hudson River School. In the midst of a blue sky, streaked with luminous cloud-white, floats a clump of earth that has brought forth shiny green leaves and tender pink blossoms. It has long been recognized that figurative shadows and biomorphic forms haunt abstract art. Wall-Romana is doing something quite different—presenting an apparition of realism in the service of nature, a very nineteenth-century kind of spiritual realism, uprooted from the earth and suspended in an abstract empyrean. Her work does not fit the paradigms of today's mainstream traditionalism, but these





Margaret Wall-Romana, *Painting Painting (with van der Weyden)*, 2009

COURTESY GEORGE BILLIS GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

highly original, lovingly crafted works offer a fresh perspective on the long and multifarious history of the art of painting. George Billis Gallery, 2716 South La Cienega Boulevard, Los Angeles, California 90034. On the web at [www.georgebillis.com](http://www.georgebillis.com). Wall-Romana has also been seen in a museum context, in “Painting Before and After Words: Margaret Wall-Romana” (January 20–April 3, 2011) at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Galleries—despite the pressure of the economic downturn on the commercial sector of the art world—have done an excellent job of vetting and promoting traditionalist artists. Alert critics and collectors can help sort through the welter of possibilities, laying the groundwork for art historians, who try to shape a cogent but flexible narrative. Museums should be doing more, by mounting exhibitions that explore the varied aspects of new traditionalist art and adding to their permanent collections. There have been showcases for individual artists and samplers of contemporary art at some smaller museums, but it would be exciting to see a major exhibition.