In February, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s European Paintings department mounted a solo show of a female painter for the first time in over four decades. This first-ever retrospective of Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (which originated at Grand Palais in Paris last year), featured the French 18th-century master who has long gone overlooked (save for her portraits of Marie Antoinette), obscured by the shadows of her male contemporaries (namely, Jacques-Louis David). It’s a case that recalls the notorious 1989
painters who have built the all-too-Western canon of figurative painting. And while gender plays no role in the capacity to create a compelling painting, today, a critical mass of female painters are embracing figuration, diversifying it, and pushing the conversation around it forward.

The current landscape of contemporary figurative painting is particularly strong, not only due to the commercial market for it, but perhaps more so the way that artists are portraying people in response to salient topics and issues of the 21st century—from race, gender, and war, to privacy, social media, and love. “We are living in a time that’s ripe with debate over what it means to be a human in one kind of body or another,” says Emily Mae Smith, one of 20 female figurative painters discussed below. A mere fraction of those working today, these women build upon the masterful work of figurative forebears, including powerhouse females from Leonora Carrington and Alice Neel, to Elizabeth Peyton and Faith Ringgold, to Nicole Eisenman and Mickalene Thomas.

The artists below, in early or mid-career stages in their practices, span Los Angeles to Baltimore, Johannesburg to Zurich, with a strong contingent in New York (where figuration is especially palpable). Each are creating inspiring figurative paintings that speak to the present, and offer glimpses into the future.

**Jordan Casteel**

Casteel, who describes herself as hyper-aware of her surroundings, creates vivid large-scale paintings that picture black males from the communities where she has lived. “I am most interested in sharing sensitive, humanistic, and honest stories of my community,” she explains of this focus, which she began as an MFA candidate at Yale. Her paintings—which are now featured in a group show at HOME in Manchester, England and can be seen this summer in New York at the Studio Museum in Harlem and James Cohan Gallery—are sincere portrayals of men and boys, often in pairs or trios on living-room couches or floors, that capture family and friendship through a crisp, realist style, and vibrant colors. “Harlem and the people who occupy its streets have become the protagonist,” she says of the work she is currently producing as a resident at the Studio Museum. “Having a studio situated on 125th street has allowed for me to create a bridge between the community and the museum. The street has literally entered the museum through my paintings.”

Sanam Khatibi

B. 1976, Tehran, Iran. Lives and works in Brussels, Belgium

Working across painting, sculpture, embroidery, and tapestry, Khatibi envisions scenes that emphasize primal impulses and power struggles among human beings. “I am interested in the male-female interaction, and the thin line that exists between our fears and desires,” Khatibi says.
hunting rabbits, draping snakes and octopi over their shoulders. “My women are vulnerable and yet predators at the same time. They are also depicted within the same plane as the animals, who represent power, danger, and our primitive instincts,” she says, though she notes that the women have an ambiguous relationship with power, violence, sensuality, and one another. “I suppose they are all me—and they are all bits and pieces of us all,” she offers. Khatibi’s works will feature in solo shows this fall at NICC Vitrine and Super Dakota in Brussels and The Cabin LA in Los Angeles.

Becky Kolsrud  

B. 1984, Los Angeles. Lives and works in Los Angeles, California
Newly represented by Tif Sigfrids in L.A. and featured in two group shows in New York this summer (at Maccarone and Foxy Production), Kolsrud is garnering attention for her unique portrayal of female figures, most recently pictured behind criss-crossing gates. (Her works featured in a smart two-person show with Gina Beavers earlier this year at JTT in New York.) “The figures in my paintings are characters invented in my imagination or ubiquitous in daily life, media, or advertising,” says Kolsrud, who finds fodder in signage, clip art, and cosmetic packaging, among other sources, to create meaningful works that comment on the challenges females face by physically obstructing their bodies. “In the paintings I like to have a recognizable subject to ground an abstract idea. It creates a tension that doesn’t let you get too swept away in the material.” Recent works, she says, have spanned a fictional group in a corporate law office, or a more abstract take on the Three Graces (Charm, Grace, and Beauty), who were portrayed as animated figures (Dora the Explorer, Sailor Moon, and Princess Ariel).

Nina Chanel Abney  Follow

At first glance, Abney's graphic colorful style might recall modernist painter Stuart Davis, but her subject matter is distinctively contemporary. Abney’s narrative paintings and collages—filled with a pulsating mix of color, text, and figures—swifly tackle topics related to race, gender, and politics. Dreams, personal experience, and conversations inspire her works; police brutality has figured prominently in recent paintings, leading many to associate the works with the Black Lives Matter movement. The artist has gained steady momentum ever since a fierce MFA thesis show at Parsons in 2007 that caught the attention of her gallery, Kravets Wehby, and the Rubell Collection, which led to her inclusion in the important traveling exhibition “30 Americans.” Her works were recently shown at the Whitney, and this can be seen as part of the artist-run super PAC “For Freedoms” at Jack Shainman and in Jeffrey Deitch and Joseph Sitt’s outdoor street art exhibition Coney Art Walls.

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum  
Follow

B. 1980, Mochudi, Botswana. Lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa
Panthea 02, 2016
Tiwani Contemporary
“I’m often trying to tell stories or respond to a narrative or mythological drive in my work and I think using the figure is a natural and almost necessary way of getting at that drive,” says Sunstrum, whose works span painting and drawing, but also installation, stop-motion animation, and performance. Trained as a dancer, she models her figures on herself, using her own body as a vehicle for exploring existential narratives and advanced scientific and mathematical theories, while challenging conceptions of how the female has been represented in art and art history. “I’m curious about how arms can hang, how knees can bend, how a back can twist—to suggest an entire identity or history even if it’s an invented one,” she explains. “I find it fascinating that the things our ancestors were most obsessed with are the same things we as so-called advanced scientific thinkers are still obsessed with: Who are we? Where do we come from? Why are we here? How was the universe made? The figures in my work operate as carriers of these musings.”

Genieve Figgis  🌟 Follow

B. 1972, Dublin, Ireland. Lives and works in County Wicklow, Ireland
“All my favorite artworks have figures in them,” says Figgis. “Since I began drawing as a child that was my main interest.” Her lush paintings frequently center on fictional aristocrats in lofty interiors, portrayed in idiosyncratic swirls of paint that melt together. While some works seem dark and dystopian, others are tinged with notes of humor and levity; others still feel sweet, or elegant. (Her characters came alive brilliantly in an animated film earlier this year in a fitting collaboration with the Metropolitan Opera.) “I am trying to represent the figure in a way that maybe I can’t with words or writing,” she notes. “Paint is so convenient and I have so many things that I want to say that drawing with paint does it well enough sometimes.” The artist counts history, architecture, astronomy, and nature among her inspirations, as well as paint itself. “Paint is so beautiful. It is such a lovely experience for me. The challenge of it and the ideas that I want to explore feel much easier to do when I am alone in my studio. I feel free.”

Tschabalala Self

Self creates large patchworks combining painting, swatches of fabric, and canvas that examine the black female body in the present. Upon beginning her career, the young artist focused on found images of women—plucked from music videos or magazines, family albums and friends’ photographs—considering the ways that she and her subjects were understood from outside perspectives. “My first large work was a copy of a Lil’ Kim poster from the ’90s,” she says. “My older sister had it in her room when I was younger; I remember my mother didn’t like it and I was intrigued by the controversy it created.” Her works have shifted in recent years to focus on personal experience and her own fictional narratives. “I find inspiration in my everyday experiences with my friends, partner, family, and strangers,” Self explains. “I am still dealing with themes related to sexuality, gender, and race… however, I am examining these realities through lived experience rather than didactics.”

Alejandra Hernández

B. 1989, Bogotá, Colombia. Lives and works in Ghent, Belgium
Be it a composed young woman seated in her kitchen with a copy of Kafka, or a wild modern-day take on the Three Graces, one laying upside down while another plays the melodica, Hernández creates playful portraits, bouncing between real life and one she’s imagined. “On one hand there are my fictional characters, whom I suppose are a mixture of people I’ve seen in real life, films, media, comics... for them, I can make up a whole universe,” she notes. “On the other hand I like to work with real people—their flesh and bones, feelings and conversations, their personal universes.” Real or fictional, Hernández takes great care to surround her subjects with objects that hold significance, small clues that hint at their personalities. For one recent
fond of the tradition of model painting in the studio. It’s a very classical approach, but I don’t see myself as the mastermind or a control freak. It’s done as a collaboration between the both of us. Usually we engage in many conversations; it’s like having friends over, and somehow all of that gets rendered into a final piece, which happens to be a painting.”

Jesse Mockrin

B. 1981, Silver Spring, Maryland. Lives and works in Los Angeles, California

Mockrin traces her unique figurative style back to her early teens. “I was obsessed with Bonnard at the time, and I painted my best friend over and over again in the bathroom—in the tub, washing her face, washing her hair,” she explains. “In high school, when my painting class took a field trip to do plein air landscape painting, I painted a picture of my legs instead. I feel like I have always been able to see the figure better than anything else and gravitated towards painting it.” Mockrin’s enticing paintings are marked by smooth planes of color and textures, from shiny fabrics to soft skin. “The themes I return to again and again in my painting are the truncation of the body, the slippery nature of
and 18th-century European painting (namely Fragonard); dreamy scenes are populated by dolled-up dandies and androgynous white arms and legs poking out from cascading gowns, couched in lush flora or fabrics. “For me, a successful painting is built around a figure, even if it’s just a small piece of a body,” she notes. “That piece is the charge, the element that holds the rest together.”

Amy Sherald

B. 1973, Columbus, Georgia. Lives and works in Baltimore, Maryland

Having grown up attending private school in the American South, among few other black children, Sherald has long been drawn to addressing constructions of race in her paintings, responding to personal experiences as well as black history. In her portraits, inspired by people she encounters spontaneously in everyday life, Sherald renders her figures’ skin in shades of gray—variations of black and naples yellow. Since moving to Baltimore, where she completed her MFA at Maryland Institute College of Art in 2004, the nature of her work gravitated towards the social issues and discourse of the surrounding community. Recent works, like Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance) (2013), for which she won the National...
paintings originated as a creation of a fairytale, illustrating an alternate existence in response to a dominant narrative of black history,” Sherald says.

Grace Weaver  Follow


lust for lite, 2015
Soy Capitán

“Teenage Dream” and “Skinny Latte” were the telling titles of Weaver’s
paintings of youthful, frolicsome figures. She likened the paintings in the former show, which took its title from a Katy Perry hit, to pop songs; the latter was a tragicomedy following a female protagonist through daily dramas. Indeed, her oils, in palettes of ripe purples, greens, and reds, exude upbeat rhythms and relatable messaging, and a magnetic force of attraction. Weaver’s visions—from a lively day at the park, to a dance party, to intimate moments shared among friends or lovers—take cues from Matisse and Picasso, but with unmistakable 21st-century flourishes like green juice and earbuds.

**Hayv Kahraman**

B. 1981, Baghdad, Iraq. Lives and works in Los Angeles, California

Self-taught artist Kahraman uses her own body as a form of language. “I come from a diasporic culture where I’ve had to navigate being an Iraqi refugee in Sweden, Italy, and now the United States, so finding a common denominator, the body, became the perfect medium.” To create her works, primarily oils on linen, the artist photographs herself in classical, Renaissance-like poses, and makes drawings from the...
flowing fabrics, with a soft shock of black hair, in graceful configurations, often contrapposto. “[This character] is someone who was taught to believe that European art history was the ultimate ideal. She became an expression of who I had become as an assimilated woman. I’m working to give her agency and a voice as I obsessively repaint her again and again.” Recent canvases (now on view at Jack Shainman Gallery’s The School in Kinderhook, New York) embedded with acoustic foam respond to research into violent sounds, such as the air raid siren she heard as a child during the Gulf War; while others adopt poses from a U.S. military pamphlet filled with pictograms around scenarios involving hostages, smuggling, and weapon identification.

**Gina Beavers**  
Follow


Beavers’s high-relief paintings are dimensional portrayals of people and
come from the internet, predominantly social media, so when the images I’m looking at are memes, makeup tutorials, body painting, the figure becomes a part of the narrative,” Beavers says. During art school she looked to underground female comic book artists, like Julie Doucet, for inspiration, but following her MFA coursework at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she turned to abstraction. “At some point I started titling my very abstract pieces after the things in the world they were based on, and as I did that, elements of representation began to creep back in, figures included,” she explains. In recent works she is exploring the wealth of nail art on the internet, creating paintings of intricately manicured fingers and toes.

Louisa Gagliardi  Follow

B. 1989, Sion, Switzerland. Lives and works in Zurich, Switzerland

Left: Louisa Gagliardi, Madrugada, 2015; Right: Louisa Gagliardi, La Belle Heure, 2016. Images courtesy of the artist and Tomorrow.
Gagliardi is trained in graphic design, and her art has grown out of a mastery of digital illustration. She designed publications and advertisements for exhibitions and luxury brands before fully focusing on her independent artwork, which took a turn toward what she describes as “robotic” figurative works in 2013. “Even in my recent work, the subjects aren’t male or female, more avatars,” she says. These avatars surface from dark backgrounds, their smooth, luminous faces and bodies often covered by long, lanky fingers tipped with glowy fingernails. “I like breaking into people’s intimacy, exposing them,” Gagliardi explains. “In my recent exhibition at Tomorrow, ‘La Belle Heure,’ walking into the show felt like entering a couple’s private space, but as much as you were the voyeur, they also were looking at you and posing for you.” The paintings are ghostly and surreal, executed in deep greens and browns that filter into pale blues and electric lilacs, at times resembling the tonal palette of a photographic negative. Other works fiercely celebrate female body parts, finished with nipple and genital piercings.

Firelei Báez  Follow

B. 1981, Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic. Lives and works in New York, New York
Báez’s lush paintings often foreground female bodies and faces, incorporating imagery associated with various cultural symbols, from palm fronds and feathers to tufts of fur and intricate textile patterns. Rendered with the artist’s precise touch, in acrylics and gouaches, her works coalesce to form powerful narratives around ancestry and cultural identity. Báez gained much deserved exposure last fall with her solo museum shows “Patterns of Resistance” at the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art and “Bloodlines” at Perez Art Museum Miami. “I looked at the idea of ancestry in a way that extended beyond the physical bloodline to explore the idea of a lineage of resistance and self-definition, which is especially tricky when you’re the product of an ahistorical narrative, as many are from the African diaspora,” Báez says of the Miami show, an expanded iteration of which will travel on to other institutions including the Andy Warhol Museum. “I started incorporating the figure into my work as a way to navigate my own sense of identity, particularly because I came from a place that didn’t fit into one specific narrative. It was a way for me to untangle what I was going through on a daily basis.”

Aliza Nisenbaum  ⌂ Follow

B. 1977, Mexico City, Mexico. Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York
“To me the distinction between abstraction and representation is less interesting than thinking about the politics of visibility, who is depicted and why,” says Nisenbaum, whose works deeply consider the interactions and proximity among artist, sitter, and viewer. After a decade of working in abstraction, she moved into figuration upon relocating to New York; she now paints portraits from life. “For about four years now I’ve painted portraits of Mexican and South American undocumented immigrants to the United States. The slow process of observational painting [allows for] conversational exchange between myself and my sitters, which often [results in] group portraits spanning generations.” Her most recent works portray a group of 15 women employed by the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs in New York City, together at work, but also in the private spaces of their homes. “I’ve been thinking about Hannah Arendt and her writing about the private realm as intrinsically connected to the public one,” she notes. This month Nisenbaum’s works appear in group shows at Hannah Hoffman Gallery in L.A. and James Cohan Gallery in New York—a show that she co-organized—and this fall will see her solo show at T293 in Rome.

Mira Dancy

“Strange mothers, icons, ghosts, dear friends, and altered reflections of myself have greeted me on the canvas since I started painting,” says Dancy. “The characters in the paintings are fictional. I debate even calling them characters actually because their flatness is about an ubiquity of the body itself in our landscape and psychic consciousness.” Her beguiling female nudes, traversing canvases, murals, and neons, have charmed the art world over the past year, as highlights at MoMA PS1’s “Greater New York” exhibition, and the buzz of major international art fairs like Frieze London and Art Basel in Hong Kong. “I came to painting from writing poems, and it always was a feeling that these women appeared in the paintings kind of mid-sentence that compelled me to push them further,” she explains. Dancy intended to pursue writing in college, but the esteemed artists she had as professors, Amy Sillman and Elizabeth Murray, led her to chart a path into art. Her female figures draw on advertising and branding, as much as history and mythological tropes. “I like the idea that paintings can be haunted by the past, that they have the means to resurrect, to conjure, and to alter a sense of time or reality. Mom, Beyoncé, and Isis (the goddess) are all themes that I’m working through these days.”

Anna Bjerger  
These 20 Female Artists Are Pushing Figurative Painting Forward - Artsy

Race, 2016
David Risley Gallery
“I have always been a figurative painter,” says Bjerger. “I usually don’t know who the people in my work are, they are anonymous subjects,” she explains. For the last decade, she has worked out of a remote studio in a former schoolhouse in rural Sweden, pulling the subjects of her paintings from a trove of found imagery—stacks of outdated travel books and instruction manuals. Often borrowing from idyllic snapshots of people caught in action, she translates their quiet scenes into slick oils on aluminum, filled with soft, wispy brushstrokes. For her most recent solo show, “Elsewhere” at Copenhagen’s David Risley Gallery, Bjerger focused on a downward perspective, cropping out skies and horizons; from a girl playing paddle ball in a garden to a snow-covered mountain dotted with competitive skiers, these works lead viewers to question what lies beyond the picture plane.

Heidi Hahn  Follow

“I think most of the time I’m awful at depicting people because I want the summation of their personalities without necessarily including a human form,” says Hahn. Her recent works picture ethereal, at times ghostly, female figures whose wispy forms float in saturated canvases, caught in moments of joy or fear—narratives that stem from a longtime passion for reading and writing. “These days I’ve been trying to tell a very specific story, choosing to portray women in an everyday way without the trappings of explicit sexuality or artifice,” Hahn says. “The figures are allowed to just be and not perform to classical representations of nudity and provocation.” Hahn has been painting figuratively since her undergrad years at Cooper Union, but only recently gained wide acclaim, following a solo show at Jack Hanley Gallery in New York. For her recent series “I Saw the Future and It Reminded Me of You,” she focused on pattern making; each painting, of one or two girls, was copiously dotted with tiny flowers. “The repetition of the flower patterns was grueling to adhere to and anxiety-making, but I knew I wanted to paint within that anxiety because the content called for it.”

Emily Mae Smith  
B. 1979, Austin, Texas. Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York
Packing her paintings with nods to Warhol, Lichtenstein, broomstick people à la Disney’s *Fantasia*, or the late Victorian-era art magazine *The Studio*, Smith adopts familiar characters and tropes to create glossy, graphic paintings that convey a distinct pop aesthetic. Her work also offers cheeky commentary on issues like gender, capitalism, and violence. “I have always worked with images, signs, and representations,” Smith says. “I dislike the notion of calling painting ‘figurative’ or ‘abstract,’ as the nature of painting is both at all times. A lot of the bodies in my work have been fictional, are often objects, or not even human.” In her recent solo exhibition at Mary Mary in Glasgow, Smith presented her series of recurring broomstick characters, who appear under different guises and filters—rendered in Benday Dots, as Warhol’s *Double Elvis* (1963), or in a sensual odalisque pose and psychedelic skin.

*Casey Lesser is Artsy’s Lead Editor, Contemporary Art and Creativity.*

https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-these-20-female-artists-are-pushing-figurative-painting-forward