

**1 David Bomberg :**  
 Born 1890 in Birmingham, England.  
 Died 1957 in London, England.  
*Self Portrait, 1937*  
 Oil on canvas  
 77.2 x 56.5 cm (30 3/8 x 22 1/4 in)  
 Courtesy of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh

**2 Armen Elovan :**  
 Born 1966 in Yerevan, Armenia.  
 Lives in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.  
*Untitled (No57), 2006*  
 Oil on canvas  
 65 x 55 cm (25 5/8 x 21 11/16 in)  
 Private Collection

**3 Brian Calvin :**  
 Born 1969 in Visalia, USA  
 Lives in Los Angeles, USA  
*Turtleneck, 2007*  
 Acrylic on board  
 91.4 x 61 cm (36 x 24 in)  
 Private Collection

**4 George Condo :**  
 Born 1957 in Concord, USA.  
 Lives in New York, USA  
*Nude in Purple Chair, 2007*  
 Oil on canvas  
 134 x 117 cm (52 3/4 x 46 1/8 in)  
 Courtesy of Simon Lee Gallery, London

**5 Walter Sickert :**  
 Born 1860 in Munich, Germany.  
 Died 1942 in Bathampton, England.  
*Sir Hugh Walpole, 1929*  
 Oil on canvas  
 76.2 x 63.5 cm (30 x 25 in)  
 Courtesy of Culture and Sport Glasgow

**6 Marianne Greated :**  
 Born 1976 in Edinburgh, Scotland.  
 Lives in Glasgow Scotland.  
*Self Portrait with Hairband, 2005*  
 Oil on canvas  
 62.6 x 55.2 cm (24 5/8 x 21 3/4 in)  
 Private Collection

**7 Andre Derain :**  
 Born 1880 in Chateau, France.  
 Died 1954 in Garches, France.  
*Portrait Study, 1936*  
 Oil on canvas  
 19.1 x 24.2 cm (7 1/2 x 9 1/2 in)  
 Private Collection

**8 Alexander Guy :**  
 Born 1962 in St. Andrews, Scotland.  
 Lives in St. Andrews, Scotland.  
*Stuart, 1989*  
 Oil on canvas  
 157.5 x 106 cm (62 x 41 3/4 in)  
 Private Collection

**9 Dana Schutz :**  
 Born 1976 in Livonia, USA.  
 Lives in New York, USA.  
*Man with Wooden Teeth, 2005*  
 Oil on canvas  
 69.9 x 55.9 cm (27 1/2 x 22 in)  
 Mario Testino Collection

**10 Alex Katz :**  
 Born 1927 in Brooklyn, USA.  
 Lives in New York, USA.  
*Nikki 2, 2007*  
 Oil on linen  
 121.9 x 243.8 cm (48 x 96 in)  
 Courtesy of Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

**LIVE UNDEAD**  
 CURATED BY MICHAEL HILL JOHNSTON  
 29 January – 23 February 2008

Live Undead brings together the work of ten painters from across Europe and America, some showing for their first time in Scotland. Loosely based around the theme of portraiture, the exhibition looks at the different ways these artists deal with painting possibly the oldest of all subject matters, ourselves. Each individual approaches this in their own particular way, but it is interesting to see the links that can be drawn between artists and paintings, separated by generations if not mindsets.

Brian Calvin's serene *Turtleneck* (2007) shows a move beyond his earlier, deliberately awkward, *stacker* paintings. These seemed to fuse the twin influences of Hockney and Alex Katz whose striking *Nikki 2* (2007) embodies everything he has become famous for, grand scale, closely cropped subject matter and stylised simplification. These are skills he has been perfecting over more than 5 decades, as this example from last year proves, painted when the artist turned 80.

The paintings of Walter Sickert and André Derain show two different stages of the portrait commission. The former shows the freedom of having finished the official version, to create a superior work through an economy of technique and mastery of colour. The latter, with its quick gestural marks again shows the freedom of the artist, but this time before the pressures of producing a likeness kick in. Making this study arguably more interesting than the painting of Marie Harriman it led to.

Sickert's one time pupil David Bomberg's dark *Self portrait* (1937), painted in rapid slashing strokes, shows he too can capture an image with the fewest of marks and also why his later work was to become so influential. This frugal mark making is shared by the other self-portrait in the show by Marianne Greated, who contrasts elements of blocked in brushwork with elegant areas of pure line.

The work of both Armen Elovan and Dana Schutz take painting to the other extreme with both artists creating their own alternative worlds, populated by characters straight from their imaginations. Schutz's *Man with wooden teeth* (2005) seems to be drooping on his delicious canines picked out in thick impasto paint. While Elovan's unnamed guard seems to be peacefully sleeping while his nose bleeds, or is he in fact already dead?

Finally we have two artists who play with scale and convention to create paintings which are right, because they are wrong. Alexander Guy over inflates the head of *Stuart* (1989), while George Condo swaps his blondes face for his trademark miniature clown face. It's the fact we know what these painting *should* look like that makes them interesting.

If there is one thing which links all these paintings it's the idea that at one time they have all existed outside of what is considered the avant-garde of the day and yet their merit continues. It is clear there is something about the way people appear in paint that transcends what can be captured in photographs and still says something about the human condition that cannot, thankfully, be expressed in words.

Michael Hill Johnston is a Glasgow-based painter.

Transmission would like to thank: Merlin James; Bob van Orsouw Gallery, Zurich; Corvi-Mora, London; Culture and Sport Glasgow (Museums); Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, University of Glasgow; Scottish National Gallery, London; Zach Feuer Gallery, New York; and all the artists and private collectors who made this exhibition possible.

WHJ would like to thank Alan, Ben, Bill, Cara, Carol, Cassie, Conal, Debbie, Eveline, Giles, Katharine, Laura, LRL, Lum, Marianne, Mark, Ned, Sisco, Stuart, Susie, Tim, Timothy, Tommaso, Victoria, Will and Zach.



NOTES ON SOME (NEARBY) (FIGURE) PAINTINGS.

MERLIN JAMES



Jean Siméon Chardin  
*Lady Taking Tea* (1735)  
 Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow



Henri Matisse  
*The Painting Session* (1916)  
 Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh

TO INCLUDE the artist in the painting itself, and even the very canvas on which is being painted the picture we are looking at...these are quite well known tropes. Familiar games from Vermeer or Velazquez. What's great here is the way it doesn't become simply a conceit. It doesn't turn the painting into just an intellectual puzzle about representation. The 'painter' figure is such a roughly notated bunch of ovoids, and the whole of the impossibly self-referential yellow zone – the cursorily scrubbed head, the crude arm and detached hand that paints itself painting – it is as if all this is hardly sayable. Or hardly needs saying, because of course, interesting painting has always been self-referential, self conscious, self critiquing. It hardly needs spelling out. 'Do I have to paint you a picture?', Matisse asks: abstraction, convention, the nature of perception and illusion and depiction – yes of course these are all being played with. The girl's gaze at the black rectangles before her resonates with our own looking at Matisse's black picture. But such reflexivity is already there in Chardin. Compare Chardin's pilasters with Matisse's table-cloth pleats. Both assertions of pure pattern against imagery. Compare Chardin's grainy ground with Matisse's black-drop. Both frank announcements of 'picture space'. Compare the convolutions of the lady's contemplative head with the spiral of inwardness that is the girl.

Maybe Matisse does make his games more explicit than earlier painters did: the gilt-framed mirror holds and crops its imagery as a painting does, giving us a deep pictorial space suddenly, but one that actually comes from behind us. The glass reflects a palm that puns on the girl's swirling hair. It keeps us guessing about heights and horizons, registering the edge of the table, the edge of (perhaps) a window sill, and a further edge that might be the meeting of sea and sky. The oval mirror symbolises the eye. With its funny 'ears' it also parodies a head. Below it on the table lies what is perhaps a paint brush, but more just a black line made by Matisse's own paint brush, marking a threshold between the boy-artist and the world of his motifs. Chardin's dark vertical suspended between his lady and her tea is a more discreet pictorial punctuation. And Matisse's toying with colour seems blatant, basically distributing black, white, and a couple of primaries; though again, Chardin does much the same. Both artists are interested not only in questions about natural, inherent hue in relation to what is dyed or coated and what is inflected by shadow and reflection, but also in non-local, purely pictorial colour. (Chardin's background of green-grey, like the yellow or black in the Matisse, reports no real, observed chroma; and the earlier painter is just as much composing with his colours as 'copying' them).

But the character of *The Painting Session* comes from so much more than its idea, its 'proposition', however radically explored. The psychological cast of the work has a lot to do with the fact that the painter figure is like a child, a boy. (Again, think of certain Chardin works; a drawing student doing a 'copying' exercise; a young governess instructing an infant.) And this diminution seems to be the result not of pre-meditation but painterly process and contingency. It is as if the figure is small only because it has had to be squeezed in to the composition. You almost wonder whether the oval shape of the body might initially have stood for the (adult) artist's head. That's more the scale of figure one would expect there. Anyway, the result is to make the painter seem to have become smaller – and younger – than his sitter, herself just a young girl. He is infantilised. So the painter/model relationship here becomes something like that of a boy to his elder sister or his very young mother. He is being minded, baby-sat. There's a faintly nursery atmosphere (middle-class again), and the implication is of painting as a profound form of play: the primitive recreation of re-creating the world in image. The apparently child-like drawing and 'colouring in' in Matisse's work, as in much modernism,

seems openly alluded to in this painting which creates its amazingly believable light and space and mood out of such seemingly crude elements. (Matisse can leave the boy's foot as a cartoonish flipper, his gesture cack-handed, because elsewhere, with equally blunt marks, he can so eloquently imply the limp hang of the girl's unseen hand.)

Why does this playing feel profound? Partly because, despite the bright colours – saturated yellow, supposedly so sunny – there is a melancholy coming from the girl's lowered eyes. There's a seriousness about the painter-boy's head, too, for all its simplicity. And on his canvas the girl looks suddenly like a Byzantine saint on a gold background (another kind of 'primitivism'). A madonna-and-child association surfaces, subliminally; the very archetype of sorrow-within-joy. Though the painter is absorbed in his innocent realm of gold, around him and around the bright, gilded mirror, is negative blackness. We might know that the painting was made in 1916 – in the middle of the world's worst-yet war. We might know that Vermeer's pictures had been made against similar violence, and the girl here looking down at the blank squares of text, near the mirrored distance, may remind us of Vermeer's letter-readers at open windows. She evokes another archetype, too, that of the fortune teller. The painting's title in French is *La Séance de Peinture*, reminding us of a clairvoyant's séance (the same work is used for a session with a psychoanalyst). The mirror is a crystal ball, and in those blank, inscrutable 'cards' the girl divines things.



Balthus  
*Rising* (1955)  
 Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh

THE TITLE OF this painting, *Le Lever*, refers to getting up, rising from bed. But there are all sorts of related associations evoked – rising from the tomb; emerging from a womb or sac; shedding skin; breaking butterfly-like from pupa; bodying forth from flatness or undefined into corporality; coming to consciousness; maturing into (self-)sex-awareness.

Although she is 'rising' she is simultaneously descending, climbing down, maybe from a spirit world into a physical one. The extremities of the figure are sketchy and 'unfinished', while the torso is ripe and full. She is dragging herself from one dimension into another. Even – or especially – her head is oddly obscure, a flat mask that seems to tip back into some shadowy other world, under a canopy that is notionally her hair, but that reads like a dark void. She embodies painting itself in the process of coming to life, adumbrating, and even breaking into the space of the real world. The raised hand (though it really grasps a bed post) gives the feeling of a curtain being drawn aside, letting in light. She reveals herself to us, but more, she reveals to herself the world, the day, into which she will stride.

The pose has been shown to closely echo a certain Caravaggio cupid; but it has lots of precedents across renaissance art, sacred and profane. Indeed the combination of languorous sexuality with a high, momentous, almost religious resonance is central to the painting. If you divide the figure vertically from nose to toe, on the right you have a classic reclining Venus pose, on the left a crucifixion. In fact, the way the figure's left

arm drops (the only limb not to touch one edge of the picture) evokes the deposition from the cross.

Artaud once said that if Balthus spurned pure abstractions (Mondrian's crisscross grids, say) and remained committed to appearance, it was 'all the better to crucify it'. He meant that Balthus sacrificed imagery fully to his own formal ends, but maybe he was also nodding to that dimension of the paintings that draws deeply from religious art. (Balthus used a pieta pose in his notorious *Guitar Lesson* for example, and the plank-carrier in *La Rue* alludes to Christ's carrying of the cross). The girl here is anyway strung out in some suspension between full figuration and the abstraction of the marks that surround her (verticals, diagonals, horizontals, curves), and the flatness out of which she seems to be taking form, and the frame from which she frees herself.

The diagrammatically drawn cuboid in the background – a cupboard or other bit of furniture – is cousin to the tables in both the Chardin and the Matisse. Like them it chimes with the regularities of a painting itself, which is both a kind of board on which things may be arranged and a kind of box which things can appear to be inside, and to have the potential to emerge from. The whole structure of the four-poster in this picture is synonymous, too, with the pictorial proscenium (puppet-box, peep-show booth) of easel painting.

In various ways, of course, the crux is the girl's sex. Writers like to observe that her crotch is the geometric centre of the composition. It actually isn't. Balthus if anything avoids such trigonometric tricks, though he is always being credited with them. But sure, we recognise the painting's pivot. And its bald blankness is what startles, after the apparent gesture of dramatic unveiling. Paradoxically, like the blankness of the breasts, it is provocative in being un-punctuated. The denials and omissions of the idealised Nude-in-Art – no nipples, no pubic hair, no real genitalia at all – are brought to attention here, made as bizarre as they would be if those absences were to be encountered in a real body. (How much *more* disconcerted Ruskin would have been!).

It would be naïve to accuse this picture of the usual crimes associated with masculine depiction of the feminine in Western art (the patriarchal gaze etc.). Not that Balthus, in protesting that he merely hymned the innocence of youth and beauty, wasn't being disingenuous or self-deluded. But rather, at the very least, he is making conventions conscious, examining them, just as Matisse and Chardin more understatedly investigate what it is to look at, and depict, a (female) model. More than that, Balthus really messes with the stereotypes. The body in *Rising* is pulled between classic beauty and distortion, dissolution, awkwardness, stuntedness, even literal defacement. It mixes up allusions and quotations from art history and it experiments with the ambiguous and fluid associations of expressive pose and body language. And there is something androgynous about the figure, for all the obvious female features. There's Bacchus and Cupid and Ganymede in there, even if we don't know the Caravaggio source. What that dolly groin is missing could as easily be a putto's penis.

Finally, the 'purity' of classically idealised femininity, which is most truly congruent with prudery, misogyny and sexism (and thus with prurience and sex obsession), is not only exposed but gloriously defied in Balthus's painting. The suppressed vagina returns multitudinously and unashamedly in all the vulva-like openings and folds and spreadings of the drapery around it. That stumpy, knobby head and neck even seems to part and penetrate the painting itself.

Merlin James is a Glasgow-based painter.



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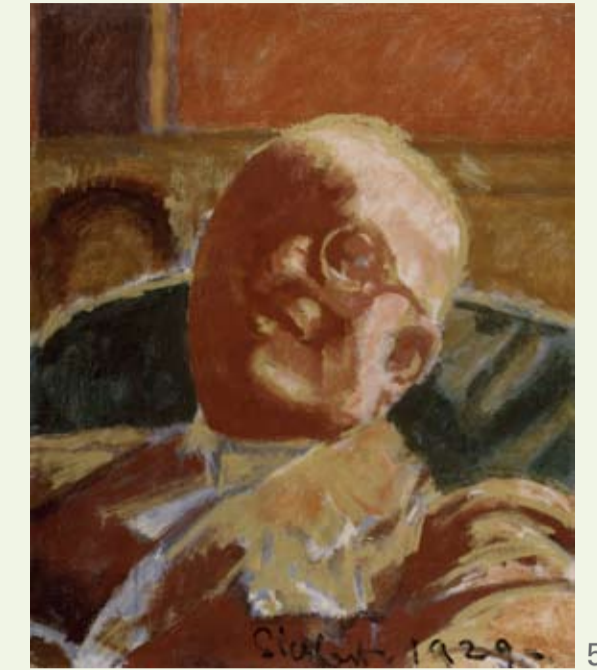
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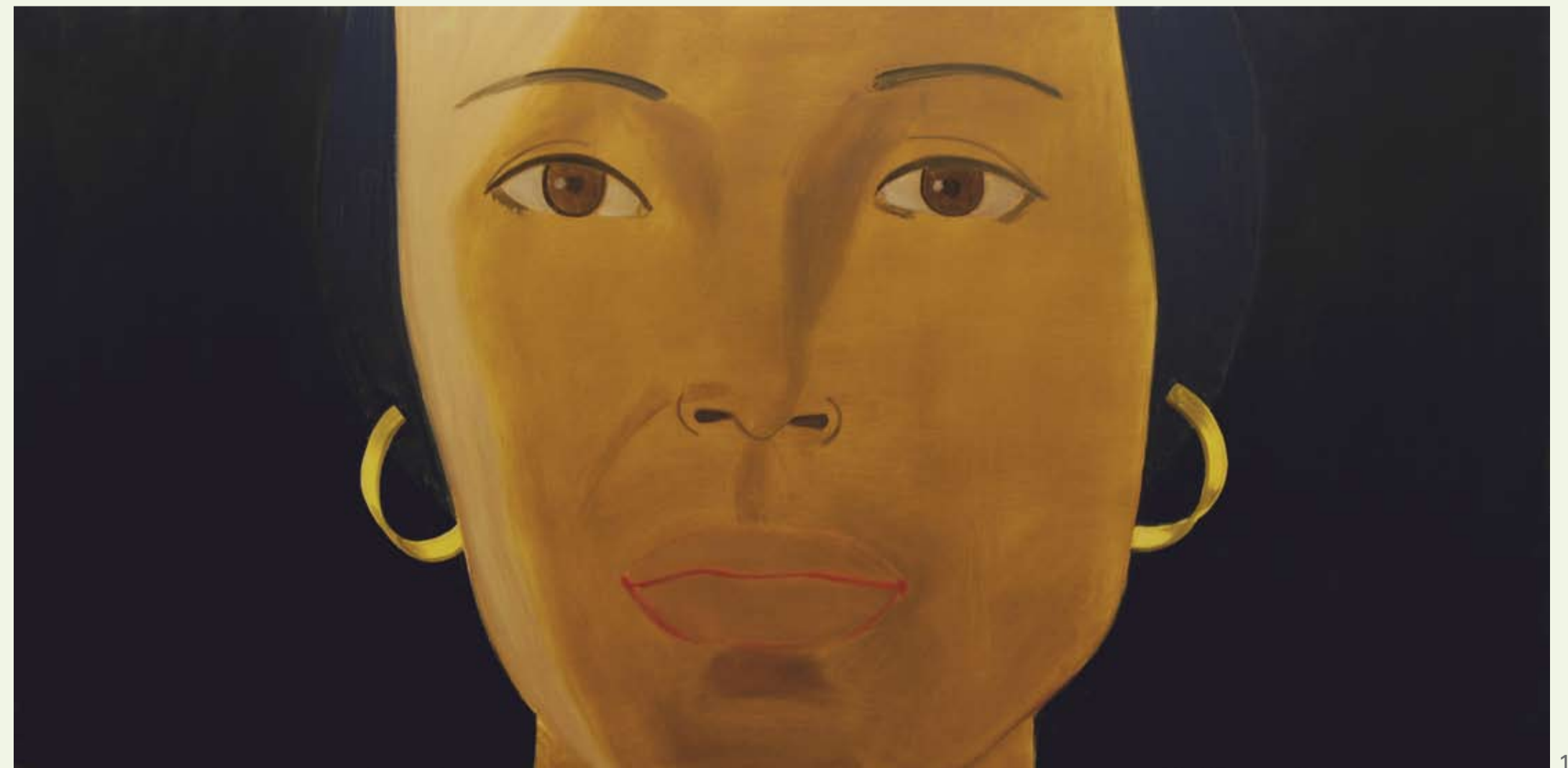
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