

KEEPING IT REAL

As realism returns to the art world, it is female artists who have taken centre stage in depicting not only the reality of life but women themselves

Writer **CHARLIE NEWMAN**

An uncanny feeling might wash over you when visiting galleries and museums across the world – there appear to be eyes peering out of the canvasses on display, sometimes bearing deeply into our soul, other times glancing nonchalantly, shyly glimpsing away or searching for answers. Realism and figurative art have unquestionably returned to the art world and beyond. Fashion trends are leaning more toward neutral palettes and easy-wearing silhouettes heralded by The Row and Margaret Howell. Even the Italian luxury design house, Bottega Veneta, took a dramatically understated turn under the creative direction of Matthieu Blazy. Once we splashed our “best lives” across social media in search of more followers. Now Gen Z is favouring more honest posts for a select few on their private accounts, and BeReal boasts more than 10 million users a day. The world is craving the real, and the art world is responding.

Of course, realism and figuration never really left the art world but they’ve travelled far from their historical roots. Early whiffs of realism can be sourced from the Barbizon School of Painters, an art movement founded at its namesake village in France, active between 1830 and 1870. It was in this picturesque village where Jean-François Millet, Théodore Rousseau and Charle Françoise Daubigny gathered to paint local landscapes, inspired by the work of John Constable.



The Still Point of the Turning World
Nancy Cadogan

With landscapes obliterated by the First World War, realism rapidly departed from landscapes and graduated into figures, establishing a “return to new order”. New Objectivity was founded by GF Hartlaub in Germany, kickstarting a “new realism bearing a socialist flavour”. Simultaneously, magic realism was established by German art photographer, art historian and critic Franz Rohan, where real life was sprinkled with elements of fantasy. Regionalism was created in the US, starring Ed Hopper’s quiet scenes of everyday American life, while the gritty aftermath of the war in London emanated from sooty scenes illustrated by the British Sink Painters. Even established Cubists Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso shied away from their angular manifesto and returned to a neoclassical phase, hungry for a more empathetic world.

So where does realism reside now? Just as the post-war world reached for relatable imagery, we find ourselves today seeking solace in the magic of realism in reaction to the ongoing horrors of the pandemic, climate change, cost of living crisis and the Ukraine war. British painter Nancy Cadogan uses inky blues and Pepto-Bismol pinks to radiate a brighter future, where her solitary figures quietly read, eat, drink or take a moment for themselves in nature or in town. Her work is entirely about finding stillness, finding a space of contemplation and to make paintings that make people feel better. It’s no wonder Cadogan is a favourite of realist art collectors Steven Alan Bennett and Dr Elaine Melotti Schmidt, who founded the Bennett Collection of Women Realists in 2009.

Post-pandemic, starved of socialising, Sahara Longe’s triptych of a party scene intoxicated viewers at London’s 2022 Frieze. Longe’s life-size figures pulse with awkward energy, sipping nervously on their cocktails, lingering over small talk. “I like to observe,” Longe explains.



Triptych 1, 2022
Oil on linen
80 3/4 x 61 1/8 in. / 205 x 155 cm

Triptych 2, 2022
Oil on linen
80 3/4 x 59 1/8 in. / 205 x 150 cm

Triptych 3, 2022
Oil on linen
80 3/4 x 61 1/8 in. / 205 x 155 cm

© Sahara Longe. Courtesy of Timothy Taylor, London / New York

“At parties, you always see something strange, something slightly off-balance that you don’t understand. People have secrets, and no one is quite as they seem.” US-born, England-based artist Chantal Joffe further plays on codes of social structure. Her larger-than-life portraits of porn actresses, models, writers, mothers and children defy traditional notions of “noble” and feminist art.

London-based artist Gill Button captivates the viewer’s attention with the enchanting eyes of her female-representing figures. Their eyes are outlined with mascara and eyeshadow, lips stained red or pink, reminiscent of faces we find in magazines, which she is inspired by. At first, they seem alluring but on second glance we find ourselves troubled by their emotional state. Button is “fascinated by what is behind the façade ... none of us are wholly strong, glamorous, confident. Through the painting process these vulnerabilities become a little more apparent.” There’s a vulnerability and sense of freedom in her paintings that garner our sympathy and attention.

While Button uses the media as source material, she is wary of its effects on human nature, pondering over whether the current resurgence of realism “could be a reaction to the selfie culture. We are constantly fed with images of celebrities, friends and complete strangers, seemingly doing everyday things ... our curiosity and appetite appear insatiable. With a painting, this fast turn around of consumption slows down; there is a more nuanced reflection that allows us to have a more contemplative, perhaps more honest experience.”



Silence
Gill Button



'Floating', 2022, Acrylic on linen, 50x40cm
Laura Lancaster

Newcastle-born sisters and artists Laura and Rachel Lancaster are cautious, too, of the internet and its knock-on effect on their artistic practice. Rachel believes that the future of realism depends on "the increased prevalence of deep fakes, AI and how this impacts our concept of the 'real'", promoting "an increased fluidity between the real and the imagined". Laura agrees that realism answers "the impulse to connect more directly to the reality we're all experiencing, to close the gap between art and life". The mystery lies at the core of their paintings – Laura's figures restlessly clamour across the canvas, disguised behind her thick application of paint, while Rachel zooms cinematically in on a ruffled collar, a party balloon hovering over somebody's face or an unwrapped parcel, leaving us hungry for answers.

Collectively, there's a fine balance between familiarity and distance, dreams and reality. Antonia Showering aims to "recreate intimate, universal moments drawn from my own experiences, desires and worries, but painted with enough ambiguity for the viewer to recognise something from their own realities in work". Throughout her work we find punctuations of universal domestic scenes – fried eggs, frenzied kisses and summer strolls interrupting dream-like scenes. Button notices that figurative artists "are entering the domain of surrealism, creating dream-like, fantastical scenarios ... maybe we are all now aching for a bit of escapism?"

When conjuring thoughts of art and realism, we'll most likely draw from the male artist heavyweights of the past; John Singer Sargent's frenetic faces, Lucien Freud's folds of flesh, Édouard Manet's pensive portraits, or Edgar Degas's feverish features. While all of these male painters felt au fait with their depictions and understanding of women, today, female painters feel more compelled to paint other women. Nancy Cadogan suspects "that women are painting women because that's the story they know and therefore there's truth to it", and without truth, art can slip into feeling brash and insensitive.

Scottish painter Caroline Walker dedicates her entire practice to "women's experience". Whether it's women having a pensive moment at the kitchen sink, night feeding, cleaning or at work, Walker's paintings are a celebration of women's daily toil, launching it onto a stage it previously wasn't welcome on. Her deft brushwork elevates the scenes to a bustling reality; bathed in a warming palette, we're invited to marvel at their unwavering strength.



'Pull The Strings', 2022, Oil on canvas, 60x50 cm
Rachel Lancaster



Just have fun, 2021
© Antonia Showering. Courtesy of Timothy Taylor, London / New York



Tarh, 11.30am, Southall
Caroline Walker



Sacrifice, 2021
© Antonia Showering. Courtesy of Timothy Taylor, London / New York



Theatre
Caroline Walker



Scorpion Bay
Kylie Manning



Omai (Afterlife) after Sir Joshua Reynolds's Portrait of Omai
Elizabeth Peyton

Other than a shared and honest depiction, why do women in this burgeoning movement appear to be solely painting women? Laura Lancaster suspects that as the “representation of female artists” grows, “it’s a way for women to include ourselves in this longstanding conversation”. They are quite literally painting themselves into history, or “her story” we should say.

This summer, we can experience figurative painting in real life. David Zwirner will be showcasing Elizabeth Peyton’s *Angel* at its London gallery, and Hauser and Wirth is showing the late Cathy Josefowitz’s *Forever Young*. Bettina Moriceau Maillard, the director of Josefowitz’s estate, explains that it was the artist’s experience as a woman that made her “crippled by the image of one’s own body and the dictates of society and the patriarchy. Figuration allowed her to change this image, to free herself from the body and therefore from the status of women.” Throughout her career, Josefowitz’s body was always “her main instrument of expression”.

American artist Kylie Manning is resolutely unshackling her practice from the constraints of patriarchy, questioning “what we consider a feminine colour or a masculine colour”, or why a seated figure with their legs sat far apart is considered masculine, or why “fast, broad strokes” are read as “powerful which they then associate with masculinity”.



Untitled c. 1974
Watercolor on cardboard 80 x 54.6 cm / 31 1/2 x 21 1/2 in
Cathy Josefowitz © Estate of Cathy Josefowitz
Courtesy Estate of Cathy Josefowitz and Hauser & Wirth



Untitled 1974
Gouache on paper 69 x 95.5 cm / 27 1/8 x 37 5/8 in
Cathy Josefowitz © Estate of Cathy Josefowitz
Courtesy Estate of Cathy Josefowitz and Hauser & Wirth

Manning points out how “a lot of art is trying to sponge what is happening in the atmosphere”. In 2023, that means finding an outlet for intense grief and anxiety. Cadogan says, “People want to feel secure, they want to feel safe, they look for help, they look for quiet, they look for inspiration, escape, to be energised, to be enlightened and to have answers.” Find this among the resurgence of female figurative and realist painters of today.