

Realist Artists on Realist Art



Marilyn Minter, Broken Glass Floor, 1978, Oil on canvas, Framed
Dimensions: 19 x 23 1/2 x 1 inches. © Marilyn Minter, Courtesy Regen
Projects and Salon 94.

By JONATHAN OROZCO October 26, 2023

In 1999, British artist and author Matthew Collings released *This is Modern Art*, a six-part TV series covering contemporary art. It touched on artists like Donald Judd, Jeff Koons, Jules Olitski, Richard Prince, among many others defining what art was at the time. One such topic, though, was

realism.

In the very first episode, he referred to an artist airbrushing a black and white bouquet of flowers, saying "this one's doing photorealism, a style that was invented 35 years ago in New York and died out soon after. What's he doing it again for?"

It was a fair question at the time. And it still is.

Of course, the practice hasn't died down, and there is an abundance of living realist practitioners. What at first glance may appear to be a very homogenous stylistic, even flat, approach is very diverse with thousands of years of naturalism in painting and sculpture.

So what do contemporary artists make of all this? Here's what they had to say...



Marilyn Minter, Electric, 2023, Enamel on metal, 48 x 36 x 2 1/4 inches. ©

Marilyn Minter

Over the course of her career as an artist, Marilyn Minter has expanded the genre of realist painting into a visually rich and sensual method that communicates metaphors of sex and violence, but also pleasure, joy, and retinal bliss.

"I've always been interested in the language of painting," Minter says. "I have a gift for copying, but my favorite artists are ones who do things nothing like me. Like Cy Twombly, Richard Tuttle, Senga Nengudi, Joan Mitchell, Philip Guston. I'm really interested in gestural brushwork, expressionism, minimalism, but it's work I can't do."

Among the most well known contemporary realist painters, her work fully engages with wider movements in the field. Early works, which often depict clothing and spills on floors, or even kisses on walls, engage with the history of minimalism and pop art as much as they depict reality. In more recent work, women in front of streaked glass show an almost dizzying and unstable image warped by the curvature of water.

"When I started painting behind glass - it was a real breakthrough," she says. "We look at everything through a screen or lens anyway so why not make it a part of the viewing experience? In the past, I've felt a little sad that so many people see my work on a screen and don't see the incredible amount of labor that goes into the painting since it changes the experience of how we understand an image, but at the same time - why should they care, most people don't know the difference.

"After photography came into general use, the figure finally started to become abstracted, or infused with a signature style of depiction by the artist," she continues. "Then you get my generation and you have Chuck

Close and Philip Pearlstein and Lisa Yuskavage who made their own style of realism. I had to think - what was my gift? I think about my work as a metaphor for the times we live in, and I realized adapting commercial imagery and shooting close ups was something that I could make mine. My goal is to make pictures of things you know exist but you haven't seen before. Close ups slow everything down and shift the way we see/understand an image."



Will Cotton, The Cowboy, 2022, oil on linen, 54 x 72 inches. Image courtesy the artist.

Will Cotton

Magical and delicious worlds are the subjects of Will Cotton's paintings. It's as if Candy Land and Americana blended into an edible utopia.

Recently, Cotton's paintings have moved from traditional portraiture with direct links to the Northern Renaissance and Romanticism, to that of cowboys out in the wild west, on pink horses with cotton candy backgrounds.

When asked about the genre, Cotton said, "As I understand it, realism is as old as paint, but hyperrealism has only existed since the invention of photography. Either way, it still comes down to subject matter and whether the painting method brings the subject to life and makes it intriguing, poetic and stimulating. The most important thing is to teach people to appreciate and discuss art in a way that's more nuanced than whether it does or doesn't 'look just like a photo!'"





Anthony Peyton Young, Fruits of My Labor, 2023, bleach, black 3.0, and oil on canvas, 26 × 46 inches. Photo courtesy of Clamp Gallery.

Anthony Peyton Young

On the more mystical side of realism, Anthony Peyton Young toys with the material world. A painter, draftsman, and ceramicist, the artist does not shy away from ideas of representation and legacy.

“Within my portraiture, it’s mostly focused on black and brown queer individuals and allies that I’ve encountered in addition to close friends and family,” he says. “Part of my interest in black queer portraiture stems from a

lack of seeing black queer families and/or black queer intimacy that goes beyond hyper sexuality/fetishization. While a lot of my portraits are done from life, some of the portraits are made up or inspired by an individual but don't hold an actual physical resemblance."

Further, his materials hold symbolic meaning. He says, "In my practice I've experimented with an array of non-traditional mediums, such as hair, hair relaxer, and gunpowder to name a few. One of the mediums I often use in a lot of my work is bleach; thinking of bleaching as a symbol of erasure—at times cleansing, whitening, and even the destructive reality of erasure, but also the generative resilience against oppression. With each of these materials there is a connection to blackness, and in some cases, will have a destructive nature, but through that destruction there becomes a creation of something new."



Robin Eley, Salvator Mundi (wrapped), 2021, Oil on canvas, gesso and

marble dust, 37 x 29 inches. Image courtesy the artist.

Shelby Keierleber

The magical sensibilities of Shelby Keierleber, a painter now based in Kansas City, Missouri, come by through her reinterpretation of painted surfaces like those found in classical frescoes as backdrops. In a 2022 mural commission titled *Four Seasons*, symbols of 21st century life come through with techniques that recall classical painting, like bundles of sage, corkscrews, or even an oxidized metal foot taken from an ancient sculpture.

To Keierleber, hyperrealism is a means to show off. "I think there are very few examples of someone painting something so real there's a reason to have painted it that way," she says. "Are you just doing it because it looks cool, or are you doing it because there's something in that for the viewer?"

"Maybe that's part of it too, just the process of being still enough to make it. You might look at something a little bit longer, as a viewer, because you're like, 'how did they do that?'"



Robin Eley, Salvator Mundi (wrapped), 2021, Oil on canvas, gesso and marble dust, 37 x 29 inches. Image courtesy the artist.

Robin Eley

Developing a unique style over the course of a decade, Australian Robin Eley has impressed viewers with his intense attention to detail. His highly refined hyperrealism has shifted on occasion, moving toward angular canvases and sculptures, and now, copies of old masters wrapped in plastic and tape.

"I make the way I make because it is the cleanest and clearest expression of me, so much so that it requires almost no thought or struggle," Eley says. "Therefore, all of the thought and all of the struggle goes into threading that conceptual needle, because authenticity and relevance are, for the realist artist, often strange bedfellows."



Marie Harnett, Nail Polish, 2022, pencil on drafting film, 6.8 x 16 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Marie Harnett

Drawing is joyous and pleasurable to Marie Harnett. The artist, who primarily transcribes images from film trailers, takes scale and detail to such a point that her images look like 20th century high photography. And like many other realists, she does not directly copy from life, or in her case, a film still.

"I do question, often, why I stay with realism, especially as other artists' works that excite me are very rarely like my own," Harnett says. "But it just feels right."

When asked about her relationship to film, she said, " I keep trying to leave film, and drawing - but I always find myself going back. I think it's because I find film so incredibly beautiful, and it can be such a brilliant vehicle for expressing something I'm interested in - usually an emotion or sense of time and place. It's also a very considered process - I go through trailers frame by frame - with no sound or colour, as it's not about the film's story, but about the story I can tell with its images.

"...I also enjoy tweaking the stills a bit, either by cropping them, so the focus is on a small part of the scene, or by removing heads, or adding elements in - like backgrounds of old masters paintings. It's like I'm collaborating with the film."



Katharen Wiese, if a black woman is afraid of the dark is she afraid of a shadow or herself, 2019, oil, acrylic, collage, paper bags and lights on panel. Image courtesy the artist.

Katharen Wiese

"I do not think there is a singular history of realism," Katharen Wiese says. "While contemporarily I think we understand realism as primarily western, which might be quantitatively true, Yoruban sculptors in what is now Nigeria were making memorial busts in Ife (around the 14th century) that have the specificity of being true to a life. The multiplicity of histories of realism, or this kind of specificity, are what allowed me to find new ways through it."

Working in the realm of place and history, Wiese's practice is heavily based on the investigation of material and geography. Drawing upon her personal upbringing in Lincoln, Nebraska, she embeds the history of figuration as a grounding point to branch off of. Though now engaging in a more conceptual practice, recent figures like Barkley Hendricks and Kerry James Marshall serve as major inspirations.



Cj Hendry, Multitulip, 2020, colored pencil, 44 x 44 inches. Image courtesy the artist.

Cj Hendry

An appropriation artist at heart, Catherine Jenna "Cj" Hendry is not ashamed to admit realism is the only style she can do. Wielding colored pencils as her tools, she drafts highly refined images of paint smears, pop cultural items, or even the occasional flower. Amassing fame on social media, she has attained commercial success, most recently at Phillips auction house.

Hendry, though, doesn't really identify as an artist.

"Despite the fact that people are like 'you're so creative,' I assure you I am not," Hendry says. "I call it methodical draftsmanship. I really enjoy the practice of hyperrealism. I enjoy drawing because I am able to be on my own in a meditative state, so I really enjoy how hyperrealism makes me feel.

"But also, that's the only art I know how to make. I wish I knew how to make other stuff, but also, I'm not making art for anyone else. I'm just making art for me." **WM**