

The New York Times

Trendy Artists Pick Up an Old-Fashioned Habit

By Carol Kino

April 17, 2005



Linda Marraccini a burlesque performer, models for a group of artists. Brian Palmer for The New York Times.

THE mood was relaxed, even familial, on a recent Tuesday evening as the painter Will Cotton welcomed visitors to his Lower East Side loft. As he set out bowls of chocolate Easter candy, the artist Inka Essenhigh, who first made her name with paintings of anime-like creatures, pinned paper to an easel. Delia Brown, an art world provocateur who specializes in society scenes starring herself, relaxed in a chair with a drawing pad at the ready. The multimedia and performance artist Guy Richards Smit handed Mr. Cotton the first CD of the night - a post-punk mix - and unpacked his watercolor kit.

With a studiously blank expression on her face, another guest, Linda Marraccini, then casually pulled off her clothes, revealing ample, Rubenesque curves.

"Standing poses!" Mr. Cotton called. The model twisted her torso, lifted an arm aloft, and the life-drawing session began.

Only a few years ago, the idea of artists gathering to paint from a model would have seemed impossibly old-fashioned and hokey - and if the model was female and nude, sexist to boot.

Yet for nearly three years now, a number of artists - not students putting charcoal to paper for the first time, but successful artists with established styles and audiences of their own - have flocked to Mr. Cotton's weekly invitation-only sessions.

"There's something kind of fun about doing something so geeky, so nerdy, so traditional," Ms. Essenhig said. "To do something so anti-conceptual and anti-Modernism feels really good, as if it were going to lead to helping you express things."

Mr. Cotton mused, "The usual idea is you do your two years at school and then you're done with it."

In the market where these contemporary artists ply their trade, the age-old discipline of drawing human figures is considered a rather fuddy-duddy exercise. Although figurative painting and drawing has always maintained some presence, in recent years rumors of its demise were rampant, as video, installation, and conceptual art rose to the ascendant.

Though figuration has recently made a comeback, hand-in-hand with the burgeoning popularity of painting, the art-world laurels still tend to go to those who package their figuration with a conceptual gambit - like John Currin's devastating grotesqueries, which often skewer precisely the types of people who can afford to buy them, or Elizabeth Peyton's romantic portraits, celebrated because they're fashioned at her own pleasure rather than a patron's behest.

Many artists feel the need to make work that speaks more directly. Yet plainspoken figuration still seems uncomfortably close to that dirty word "illustration" - or, worse, to 19th-century academic realism, dismissed as kitsch for most of the 20th century. And for some members of the group, exploring this taboo territory through life drawing, the ultimate academic learning tool, is part of the allure.

Although some members of the group are more traditional figurative painters, like Wade Schuman and Paul Caranicas, both of whom show with staunchly realist galleries on 57th Street, most are part of the downtown gallery world, where representational painting usually requires a sexy selling point. Among the regulars are Adam Cvijanovic, known for making room-size, wallpaper-like landscapes on Tyvek; Hilary Harkness, whose intricately detailed, perversely Bosch-like fantasies are peopled by lingerie-clad female figures; and the painter Steve Mumford, who until recently was traveling in Iraq, depicting the experiences of American soldiers and local people in wartime.

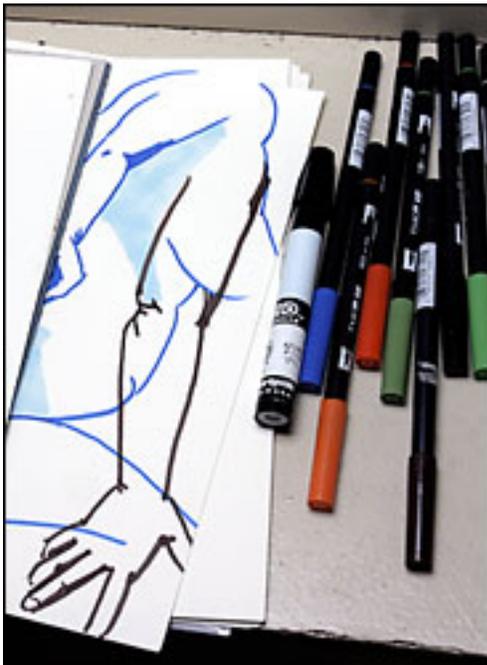
The group also draws a sprinkling of nonartists, most notably the fashion designer Cynthia Rowley, who modeled for the group when she was nearly nine months pregnant.

Mr. Cotton uses eight models in rotation, half of whom dance burlesque at New York venues like the Slipper Club. (Ms. Marraccini, the model on that recent Tuesday night, is better known as Dirty Martini.) He pays them the going rate of \$20 an hour, and each artist who turns up - usually with paper, brushes, ink and charcoal in tow - chips in \$5 apiece. Afterward, the artists sometimes go out for dinner, but more often they hang around and look at one another's work. Although it's not a class, Mr. Cotton is said to offer technical pointers from time to time.

The mood seems strikingly collegial and supportive. Ms. Brown said that some nonartists who attend arrived knowing only how to make stick figures. "They're cool - they're, like, adventurous," she said, with no hint of irony.



The resulting work included pieces from the artist Will Cotton. Brian Palmer for The New York Times.



Drawings by the artist David Humphrey from a recent life-drawing session featuring a nude model. Brian Palmer for The New York Times.

When Mr. Cotton, now 39, started the group in September 2002, he was known for fantastical landscapes made of sweets, like a house built from donuts or a molten chocolate waterfall, rendered in titillatingly photorealistic detail. He usually worked from photographs and maquettes of the scenes he was painting, built from chocolate kisses, gingerbread, Karo syrup, Crisco and the like). But when he decided to populate his landscapes with another type of eye candy - naked women - he recounts, he realized he needed to return to working from life.

So one evening, he arranged for a friend to model, and to keep things respectable, invited some friends as well. "It wasn't that I thought I should provide a forum for people to come and brush up their drawing skills," he said. "It was that I knew that I needed to, and I thought inviting other people would ensure that I did it."

The event was a success, Mr. Cotton said, not least because the results - figures executed without torturous reflection - were so immediately obvious in his work. He decided to hold another session the next week, and he has continued ever since. He now sends weekly announcements to 62 people, usually pulling 4 to 18 artists a week. Recently the group spawned its first satellite, run by Mr. Schuman in his Midtown studio.

On that Tuesday night, as ever, the group followed the standard ritual for life-drawing classes the world over. They started with short standing postures - warm-ups that benefit artists and model alike - and gradually increased the time span until Ms. Marraccini was reclining on cushions in a 40-minute pose. By then, most of the drawings were fairly far along and the mood was mellow and focused, enhanced by Eminem's lullaby "Mockingbird" on the CD and the scent of sugar drifting from Mr. Cotton's maquettes. Even though most of the artists view the event as a practice session, much of the work they made seemed proficient. Life drawing is said to get

short shrift in art school these days, but many group members were doing it long before they reached art school - like Mr. Smit, who started out drawing Greek statues in the Metropolitan Museum of Art while in grade school and graduated to live people by the age of 10.

Most say the sessions have influenced their work, although not necessarily in obvious ways. Ms. Essenhigh, who was standing at an easel at the back of the room making strong, muscular pencil drawings, said that life drawing was great for "keeping your chops up." It serves "to prevent yourself from being clichéd, from your hand always going with the same thing," she explained. (Since she began attending, the figures in her paintings have gone from flat to volumetric, and her aesthetic has changed to match.)

Ellen Altfest spent the evening trying to work at close range, moving around the room as Ms. Marracini's poses changed so she could always see her face. She said she was considering making some portraits - a sharp departure from the hyperdetailed trees and foliage she usually paints.

("I asked Will when he was gonna have a man" as a model, Ms. Altfest joked, "and he said, 'Ellen, this is not a democracy.' ")

Ms. Harkness usually sketches loosely with colored pencils or watercolor wash, whereas her paintings are tightly rendered and intensely detailed. She said she uses the sessions "to solve problems" and to "download information." "I'm one of those people who can build a figure out of spheres and cones," she said. "Observing helps me make the people I draw more real." Mr. Cotton stood at an easel working with charcoal and Conti pencil on primed watercolor paper, producing highly finished renderings that looked finished enough to be shown. Every so often, he roughed up the drawing's surface with a stiff paintbrush, a technique he said he'd picked up from a portrait painter in Central Park.

As people gazed upon one another's work afterward, the prevailing mood was curiosity. Impressed by Ms. Brown's skillful modeling, Ms. Harkness asked where she had studied art. When Ms. Brown replied U.C.L.A., renowned for its conceptual artists, Ms. Harkness looked startled. "And you can draw like that?" she exclaimed.

Later, over dinner at Good World Bar & Grill on Orchard Street, the talk turned to the 200-year-old Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the oldest art academy and museum in the country. "You've gotta go!" Mr. Cvijanovic said. "It's the only place in America that didn't throw out their plaster casts," he said, referring to the sculptures that that 19th-century art students usually drew from before moving on to live people.

In an art world that seems chiefly to revolve around the market, the weekly sessions offer the artists a chance to get together without focusing on who is showing where, and to reconnect around the basic activity that their profession is really all about.

"It's not like going to an opening because you're drawing," said the painter Amy Cutler, who has attended on and off since last October. "It's not one of those weird social situations. What you have in common is right there."