

*Circa 1995:
New Figuration in New York*

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537 West 20th Street, New York



Marlene Dumas, *The Conspiracy*, 1994. Private Collection.
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David Zwirner is pleased to present *Circa 1995: New Figuration in New York* at the gallery's 537 West 20th Street location in New York. The exhibition features eight generation-defining artists who played a central role in the resurgence and expansion of figurative painting during the 1990s: John Currin, Peter Doig, Marlene Dumas, Chris Ofili, Laura Owens, Elizabeth Peyton, Luc Tuymans, and Lisa Yuskavage.

By the early 1990s, as photography, film, video, and installation art were taking center stage, painting (and figurative painting in particular) was prematurely dismissed by some as having exhausted its possibilities and contemporary relevance. The artists in this exhibition challenged this notion. Looking to

some of the medium's classic tropes, genres, and techniques while also introducing new subjects, themes, and ideas, these artists redefined what painting could be: their incisive approaches to figuration not only spoke to the moment but also laid the groundwork for subsequent generations of painters. These influential artists have moreover continued to remain uniquely relevant in their ongoing work.

While working in different locations and contexts in the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States, each of these artists showed in New York for the first time in the early to mid-1990s, around the time David Zwirner opened in SoHo in 1993. The works on view here are drawn from key solo shows, including several that were presented at the artists' respective New York galleries (such as Andrea Rosen Gallery, Gavin Brown's enterprise, Jack Tilton Gallery, and Marianne Boesky Gallery), and point to career-expanding presentations, such as Documenta 9 (1992); *Projects 60: John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton, Luc Tuymans* (1997), at The Museum of Modern Art, New York; and the traveling exhibition *Sensation* (1997–2000), among other important shows from the decade that brought these artists and their radically original work to the forefront.

Known for his academically rendered canvases and provocative subject matter, American artist John Currin (b. 1962) draws on art-historical tropes and genres such as portraiture, still life, history painting, and mythology, giving them a distinctly contemporary appearance. As art historian Norman Bryson remarks, Currin's figurative works, which are inspired by traditional portraits as well as pinups, pornography, B movies, and women's magazines, "swerve between attraction and repulsion, pleasure and guilt, joy and shame."¹ Included in this exhibition are works that debuted in Currin's critically lauded 1994 and 1997 solo exhibitions at Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, such as *The Cripple* and *The Bra Shop* (both 1997) as well as *Ann-Charlotte* (1996), which was in the *Projects 60* show at The Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1997. That presentation, curated by Laura Hoptman, included Currin, Elizabeth Peyton, and Luc Tuymans and signified the resurgence of figurative painting in contemporary art that had been occurring throughout the 1990s.

Peter Doig's (b. 1959) atmospheric compositions focus predominantly on the figure and landscape. Influenced by his childhood in Trinidad and Canada, his paintings, drawings, and watercolors capture what appear to be familiar moments of tranquility, where abstract and uncanny elements found on the periphery of the urban and natural worlds appear with the dreamlike quality of memory. Referencing a range of art-historical precedents, Doig sources imagery from an archive of materials that includes films, newspapers, album artwork, postcards, and personal photographs. *Circa 1995* includes *Jetty* (1994), which debuted in Doig's first solo show in New York, at Gavin Brown's enterprise in 1994, the year Brown opened his eponymous gallery west of SoHo, and which was painted the same year the artist was nominated for the Turner Prize, as well as his *Briey (Concrete Cabin)* (1994–1996), a canvas from the significant series based on Le Corbusier's iconic modernist Unité d'Habitation apartment block in Briey-en-Forêt, France.

Marlene Dumas (b. 1953) has continuously probed the complexities of identity and representation in her work. Born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1953, Dumas moved to Amsterdam in 1976, where she has since lived and worked. Her paintings and drawings, frequently devoted to depictions of the human form, typically reference a vast archive of source imagery collected by the artist, including art-historical materials, mass media images, and personal snapshots of friends and family. Gestural, fluid, and frequently spectral, Dumas's works reframe and recontextualize her subjects, exploring the ambiguous and shifting boundaries between public and private selves. Having exhibited widely in Europe since the late 1970s, Dumas came to broad international attention by the early 1990s with her participation in

significant group show such as Documenta 9 (1992), and solo museum presentations, including ones at the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (which traveled to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia) (1992–1994). On view in *Circa 1995: New Figuration in New York* is a painting by the artist that appeared in her 1994 solo show *Not From Here* at Jack Tilton Gallery, New York, as well as two other significant paintings from the period.

British artist Chris Ofili's (b. 1968) enigmatic paintings investigate the intersection of desire, identity, and representation. Portraying characters from a range of aesthetic and cultural sources through a kaleidoscopic visual mode that bridges abstraction and figuration, his works serve as sites for journeys of creative transformation. On view in *Circa 1995* are three of Ofili's iconic dung paintings, which garnered him both critical acclaim and notoriety during the 1990s. These multilayered paintings, playfully bedecked with resin, glitter, and collage, rest on balls of elephant dung. Among those in the show are *Afrodizzia* (1996), which presents dazzling, psychedelic patterns of collage and color with balls of dung on its layered surface. Interspersed throughout the composition are magazine cutouts of iconic Black cultural figures. The work was included in the touring exhibition *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*—a show that made international headlines in 1999 when it traveled to the Brooklyn Museum, New York, where *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996; collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York), another elephant dung painting by Ofili (not in the present exhibition), was displayed.

Los Angeles-based artist Laura Owens's (b. 1970) experimental approach to painting challenges its material and conceptual limits. Her multilayered works combine diverse interests in folk art, comics, and wallpaper patterns with a broad range of text sources, such as the alphabet and printed media like the *Los Angeles Times*. Owens incorporates these references into a variety of techniques and media—from traditional oil painting to silkscreening and needlework. Her inventive compositions achieve a formal unity while resisting straightforward analysis, renewing the medium of painting by questioning and exploring its master narratives. Owens's work often takes the exhibition space into account, indicating the artist's awareness of the relationship between the object and the viewer. Exhibited here are works from Owens's breakout solo shows from the late 1990s. As critic Roberta Smith noted, reviewing Owens's 1998 solo exhibition at Gavin Brown's enterprise, "What is beautiful is also funny. The message here is that the medium of painting, which remains above all a surface to be engagingly animated, contains quite a bit of uncharted territory and that the old dog of formalism, unfettered by pure abstraction, can learn all sorts of new tricks."²

Elizabeth Peyton (b. 1965) creates paintings and works on paper that attest to the psychical and emotional depths of her chosen subjects. Throughout her career, whether depicting individuals from historical or contemporary eras, Peyton has been driven by an openness and curiosity that seeks to approach and understand her subjects, and, often, their creative practices. As curator Donatien Grau observes: "Her desire is one for perfection: she makes her paintings into perfect images of life, which are so beautiful and draw you in. But within that desire you can feel the longing: the longing for a life that is gone, or that is going to be gone. You can feel the desire to know—truly know—those individuals."³ The exhibition includes paintings that depict the musicians Kurt Cobain and Liam Gallagher, both important recurring subjects in Peyton's work during the 1990s, as well as the gallerist Martin McGeown, who staged an exhibition of her work in London in 1995 at his experimental gallery Cabinet.

Belgian artist Luc Tuymans's (b. 1958) deeply resonant compositions insist on the power of images to simultaneously reveal and withhold meaning. Often rendered in a muted palette, the artist's canvases

are based on preexisting imagery from a range of historical, cultural, and popular-media sources. Their quiet and restrained appearance, however, belies an underlying moral complexity that engages equally with questions of history and its representation as with quotidian subject matter. In *Circa 1995* are key paintings by Tuymans, including works which debuted in the artist's 1996 show *The Heritage* at David Zwirner. Stemming from the artist's interest in picturing the prevailing mood of uncertainty and loss that he perceived in the United States following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, the exhibition presented works that incorporated a range of recognizable symbols of American life and received critical acclaim, including from Peter Schjeldahl, who noted in his *Village Voice* review: "When I'm looking at Tuymans's work, it seems to me absurd that our culture doesn't embrace painting normally and avidly, as an enthusiastic matter of course."⁴

In her work, American artist Lisa Yuskavage (b. 1962) affirms the singularity of the medium of painting while challenging conventional understandings of genres and viewership. Her rich cast of characters and their varied attributes are layered within compositions built of both representational and abstract elements in which color and light are the primary vehicles of meaning. Several of Yuskavage's standout paintings from the 1990s will be presented in the exhibition, including works from her *Bad Babies* series (1991–1992), which the artist has described as "portraits of beings in color" and feature individual female figures seen from the knees up set against jewel-tone monochromatic fields of color. The *Bad Babies*, a breakthrough series of four works, was first shown together in Yuskavage's second solo exhibition in New York, at Elizabeth Koury in 1993. Likewise, *Big Little Laura* (1998), another seminal painting from this decade, was first shown in New York in 1998 at Marianne Boesky Gallery. As Schjeldahl wrote, again in *The Village Voice*, in praise of the works in that exhibition, "Remember when contemporary art was an adventure? With the likes of Yuskavage around, it is adventurous again."⁵

Notes

1. Norman Bryson, "Maudit: John Currin and Morphology," in Rose Dergan and Kara Vander Weg, eds., *John Currin* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2006), p. 30.
2. Roberta Smith, "Art in Review: Laura Owens," *New York Times*, November 6, 1998.
3. Donatien Grau, "Fragments on Elizabeth Peyton," in *CLOSE-UP: Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Lotte Laserstein, Frida Kahlo, Alice Neel, Marlene Dumas, Cindy Sherman, Elizabeth Peyton*. Exh. cat. (Basel: Fondation Beyeler, 2021), p. 224.
4. Peter Schjeldahl, "Bad Thoughts: Luc Tuymans," *Village Voice*, October 8, 1996, p. 86.
5. Peter Schjeldahl, "Purple Nipple," *Village Voice*, September 29, 1998, p. 138.

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