



These 20 Female Artists Are Pushing Figurative Painting Forward

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In February, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's European Paintings department mounted a solo show of a female painter for the first time in over four decades. This first-ever retrospective of Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (which originated at Grand Palais in Paris last year), featured the French 18th-century master who has long gone overlooked (save for her portraits of Marie Antoinette), obscured by the shadows of her male contemporaries (namely, Jacques-Louis David). It's a case that recalls the notorious 1989 Guerrilla Girls poster *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?*, but Le Brun is also a much-needed chink in the chain of male painters who have built the all-too-Western canon of figurative painting. And while gender plays no role in the capacity to create a compelling painting, today, a critical mass of female painters are embracing figuration, diversifying it, and pushing the conversation around it forward.

The current landscape of contemporary figurative painting is particularly strong, not only due to the commercial market for it, but perhaps more so the way that artists are portraying people in response to salient topics and issues of the 21st century—from race, gender, and war, to privacy, social media, and love. “We are living in a time that’s ripe with debate over what it means to be a human in one kind of body or another,” says Emily Mae Smith, one of 20 female figurative painters discussed below. A mere fraction of those working today, these women build upon the masterful work of figurative forebears, including powerhouse females from Leonora Carrington and Alice Neel, to Elizabeth Peyton and Faith Ringgold, to Nicole Eisenman and Mickalene Thomas.

The artists below, in early or mid-career stages in their practices, span Los Angeles to Baltimore, Johannesburg to Zurich, with a strong contingent in New York (where figuration is especially palpable). Each are creating inspiring figurative paintings that speak to the present, and offer glimpses into the future.

Heidi Hahn

B. 1982, Los Angeles. Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York

“I think most of the time I’m awful at depicting people because I want the summation of their personalities without necessarily including a human form,” says Hahn. Her recent works picture ethereal, at times ghostly, female figures whose wispy forms float in saturated canvases, caught in moments of joy or fear—narratives that stem from a longtime passion for reading and writing. “These days I’ve been trying to tell a very specific story, choosing to portray women in an everyday way without the trappings of explicit sexuality or artifice,”

Hahn says. “The figures are allowed to just be and not perform to classical representations of nudity and provocation.” Hahn has been painting figuratively since her undergrad years at Cooper Union, but only

recently gained wide acclaim, following a solo show at Jack Hanley Gallery in New York. For her recent series “I Saw the Future and It Reminded Me of You,” she focused on pattern making; each painting, of one or two girls, was copiously dotted with tiny flowers. “The repetition of the flower patterns was grueling to adhere to and anxiety-making, but I knew I wanted to paint within that anxiety because the content called for it.”



Left: Heidi Hahn, Sadness is a Fulltime Job, 2016; Right: Heidi Hahn, I Take Care of Myself, Piece By Piece, 2016. Images courtesy of the artist and Jack Hanley Gallery.