

Julia Heffernan

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Temporal Nomads: The Scandal of Postmodern History Painting

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Julie Heffernan, *Self-Portrait as Millennium Burial Mound*, 2012. Oil on canvas. 68 × 80 inches. © Julie Heffernan. Courtesy of the artist and P-P-O-W, New York.

James F. Cooper has identified a new wave of realist painting constituting a revival of 19th-century history painting.¹ There is indeed a return to something resembling history painting among many artists today. Cooper cites Adam Miller. We also see this revival in Vincent Desiderio's work, and Rebecca Solnit has aptly described the hybrid landscape-portraiture of Julie Heffernan as a "new kind of history painting."² All these painters have been or can be classified as what Donald Kuspit calls the New Old Masters who, though working in Old Master techniques, are "neither traditional nor avant-garde, but a combination of the two," carrying on the spirituality of the former and the

critical consciousness of the latter.³ Both Cooper and Kuspit read in new wave history painting and New Old Master painting, respectively, a return to humanist and modern existentialist themes absent in most mainstream contemporary art. At the same time, however, the subject matter of this new history painting fundamentally challenges the tenets of traditional history painting and its humanist foundation.

Contemporary history painting often obscures the defining characteristic of traditional history painting, namely, the story (*istoria, histoire*). History painters have always clearly depicted pivotal or climatic moments from narratives—usually classical or biblical—universally understood by their audiences. Not so with the new painters. Cooper offers Adam Miller’s *Narcissus* (2012) as representative of the new wave of history painting, but as he points out, it is difficult to tell exactly what story it is telling. Miller depicts an older woman on all fours looking not at her reflection in the water, but out into the distance. He scandalously subverts the time-honored Narcissus scene. Where is the young man staring at his reflection found in history painting, from Caravaggio to Bouguereau? Rather than illustrating a pre-existing narrative with readily understood imagery, new history painters like Miller or Heffernan suggest a narrative, but, as in a dream, a linear plot never takes form, and their symbols are understood by only the dreamer—if even he or she can interpret them. They tell stories in the manner of surrealists like Remedios Varo or Leonora Carrington, to whom Heffernan has been compared.⁴ Furthermore, such ambiguous narratives more closely parallel the postmodern work of Cindy Sherman’s untitled film stills or Kara Walker’s silhouettes, than the clear and didactic narratives of history painting.

Traditional history painting’s stories demonstrated the best in human endeavors—according to the bias of their Eurocentric patriarchal culture. Heroic men displaying virtue in the face of tragedy or adversity: David’s Horatii stoically pledging death before dishonor; Ingres’s Oedipus coolly defeating the Sphinx with his intellect. These works exhibited an underlying faith in humanism. New history painting, however, often confounds the rational, humanist subject. Crawling on all fours, Miller’s female Narcissus occupies an ambiguous territory between human and animal, like Kiki Smith’s similarly posed sculpture *Tale* (1992); both are figures of abjection.⁵ Heffernan’s paintings are consistently titled *Self-Portrait as _____*—the blank filled in with almost anything but human elements:—*Fiery Landscape*, —*Gorgeous Tumor*, —*Explosive*. Her *Self-Portrait as Millennium Burial Mound* (2012) is a history painting without human actors: the protagonists are snarling wolves, crocodiles, and other wild beasts. Perhaps the waning of the modern humanist subject is best captured in Desiderio’s mural-sized *Un’Istoria* (an ironic take on Alberti’s Renaissance concept of *istoria* which laid the foundation for Western history painting).⁶ Parodying figures from a classical white marble frieze in this mid-20th-century scene, a line of mental asylum patients wearing white hospital gowns stroll through the park. This procession literally recalls Deleuze and Guattari’s heralding of the “schizophrenic out for a walk” as the new archetypal hero of the Postmodern age.⁷ Donning white lab coats, the ostensibly rationally-minded doctors are hardly distinguishable from their patients, suggesting that classical reason has been usurped not by its former rival, Romantic emotion, but by insanity. For Kuspit, the humanism of New Old Master painting is not, however, necessarily an aspect of its manifest content. Rather, it is revealed dialectically as the artists psychically work through the ugliness and insanity of contemporary life; their psychical mastery and emotional restoration of the self are evidenced in their mastery of technique and the aesthetic transcendence it elicits.⁸ At the same time, it is important to underscore just how alien both the figuration and content of this new wave of history painting would appear through the humanist gaze of traditional history painters and the Old Masters.

Lastly, traditional history painting generally revived the classical past or interpreted the present using elements from that past. There is however a profoundly paradoxical sense of time in the new wave of history painting, making it difficult to discern the relationship between past and present. The “New Old” of “New Old Masters” begins to articulate this impossible time. Solnit reads Heffernan’s paintings of the sky falling and the landscape on fire as allegories of our current destruction of the environment.⁹ Similarly, the desolate landscape of Miller’s *Narcissus* looks like a world annihilated by human activity; decaying industrial structures and electrical powerlines emerge from a polluted atmospheric background. Perhaps Heffernan and Miller both show us *a history of the future*, dystopian worlds to come. But, like Desiderio, they do so through combinations of Old Master techniques, and at times even 17th- and 18th-century imagery. The ahistoricity of their work parallels that of postmodern pastiche. Moreover, the revolutionary nature of this work’s temporal hybridity demonstrates what Julia Kristeva calls—in reference to the timelessness of the Freudian unconscious and the drives—the “scandal of the timeless.”¹⁰ The new wave of history painters are anti-history painters in a sense. Through their return to past techniques they abandon the emptiness of present-day contemporary consumer culture and spectacle, but through their imagery and content, they shatter the past foundations of their tradition. Stylistically dislocated from the present and having dismantled the past, they move in and out of time; they are temporal nomads painting their imagined histories and Cassandra visions of the future.

Endnotes

1. James F. Cooper, “Adam Miller: Realism on the Brink,” *American Arts Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2013).
2. Rebecca Solnit, “Dandelion Clocks and Time Bombs,” *Sky Is Falling: Paintings by Julie Heffernan* (Palo Alto: Palo Alto Art Center, 2013).
3. Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 182.
4. David Humphrey, “Fizzy Nimbus,” *Julie Heffernan: Everything That Rises*, Janet Riker, ed. (Albany: University Art Museum, University at Albany, SUNY, 2006).

5. See: Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* [1980] (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
6. For a discussion of the historical development of *historia* from Greek rhetoric to medieval scholasticism, and its subsequent interpretation by Alberti in his Renaissance treatise *On Painting* (1435/6), see: Jack M. Greenstein, "Alberti on *Historia*: A Renaissance View of the Structure of Significance in Narrative Painting," *Viator* 21 (1990): 273 – 299; and Theresa Flanigan, "Viewing Renaissance Naturalism with a Moral Eye: The Ethical Function of Naturalism in Alberti's *On Painting* and Filippo Lippi's *Life of St. Stephen*," *Encountering the Renaissance*, Molly Bourne and Victor Coonin, eds. (Ramsey, NJ: WAPACC, 2016), 71 – 88.
7. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1972] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 2.
8. Kuspit, *The End of Art*, 191.
9. Solnit, *Dandelion Clocks and Time Bombs*
10. Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 2 [1997 – 98], Trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 25 – 42.