

Diverse Figures

Rehs Contemporary presents work by six figure artists in conjunction with the Art Renewal Center.

BY MICHAEL CLAWSON



1
Vanessa Lemen,
Promise, oil on panel,
24 x 18"

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Sergio Lopez, *Regatta*,
oil, 15 x 10"

With 7.5 billion people on the planet, and endless ways to pose them, dress them and have them express themselves—not to mention the thousands of artists working, each of whom creates art in their own unique way—the math on the possibilities of figure painting can be staggering. With near-limitless choices, artists somehow choose one person, one pose, one setting, one wardrobe, one mood, one idea. And the chaos of all those other possibilities melts away, leaving a singular vision, one of profound importance and magnificence.

"Figures are one of the staples of the art world," Lance Rehs, co-director of Rehs Contemporary says. "You can trace them back as the oldest subjects, even back to cave paintings from thousands of years ago. Figures are a focal point, something that people can relate to. There's abstract and conceptual art, but they are hard for people to identify with. People relate to the figure. They long for those images. They can see themselves in them."

Beginning October 28, Rehs Contemporary in New York City will celebrate the art of the figure with *ARC Select 2017: Contemporary Figures*, a six-artist exhibition presented in conjunction with the Art Renewal Center, a nonprofit organization leading a "revival of realism" in contemporary art. The six artists—Emanuele Dascanio, Daniel Gerhartz, Vanessa Lemen, Sergio Lopez, Tim Rees and Marc Scheff—were

chosen by a blind jury from a pool of thousands of other artists. Each of the six artists will present four to six works—portions of each sale will benefit the Art Renewal Center, which has put on hit shows since 2000. The key for this show, as with others, Rehs says, was to get a diverse array of talent for the exhibition.

"We wanted to find different styles with the genre of figurative painting, whether that was more abstract or more impressionistic...we just wanted a wide variety," he says. "There are so many ways to represent the figure; we loved finding artists who were portraying things a little different than other artists working." Rehs adds that variety led the gallery to Dascanio's super-detailed and delicate pastel works, Gerhartz's classic figure painting with "a beautiful looseness and softness," Lemen's "organic and abstract" compositions of multiple hands and overlapping faces, Lopez's graffiti- and tattoo-inspired nudes with floral imagery layered over the image, Rees' "spiritual and otherworldly floating figures," and Scheff's three-dimensional paintings within blocks of resin.

For California-based painter Lopez, his new work resides within two planes of existence that are merged inside the paint. "In my *Painted Roses* series, physical boundaries between skin and floral patterns are dissolved. I merge the figure in and out of the background playing with patterns of the femininity and delicacy of roses, with the dark, urban hint of floral



tattoos and piercings all loosely played around the soft delicate translucence of the female figure,” he says. “The patterns become stand-ins for nature as the female figures appear to be in the grips of rapture, as if they are in love with their own bodies and with the flowers. *Painted Roses* demonstrates how our real and perfect beauty is usually not visible or exposed; it is often covered by an external façade dictated by the culture we live in, some of which is not easily removed or separated from one’s true self.”

Lopez continues, “[*Painted Roses*] grew out of a previous series where I was using graffiti as a background and motif for the models in my paintings. My first model for the series, Julia, I knew had a lot of tattoos and I wanted to do something with them. I asked her to bring a patterned cloth as a backdrop and she happened to bring one with this vintage rose pattern on it. It just happened to be perfect for what I wanted to do. This series was originally for a show at a local tattoo shop but it just so happened to really take off for me. I have been working with it for years now, and have consistently found new ways to work within the parameters I’ve set for myself, and these days my paintings are more crisp and better focused than they ever have been before.”

Gerhartz, who lives in Wisconsin, will be showing a variety of subjects, including pairs of figures locked in embraces, some intimate and others more professional as is the case in *Pas de Deux*, which depicts two ballet dancers rehearsing a move in a quiet scene. “I have always been drawn to the classic beauty as portrayed by the human figure. In this current series of ballet pieces, color, line, harmony and form all came together to provide significant inspiration and energy to carry me through the works,” Gerhartz says. “The contrast of stillness in *Pas de Deux* paired with the movement of *A Wisp of Scarlet* offered a nice mini series to my pieces included in this current exhibition.”

The artist, who is also a prolific still life and landscape painter, seeks beauty in his work, as elusive, or as abundant, as it may be in the world. “It is my aspiration that my paintings would offer a glimpse of hope to the viewer’s heart. It is my aim to faithfully represent the beauty that exists in our world through line, color, harmony and balanced design,” he says. “I believe that this endeavor, in and of itself, will offer a balm to the viewer’s soul. In addition to representing the inspiring forms, my lifetime has been dedicated to observing the rhythms of nature, taking special





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notice to the triggers of beauty that move my being. It is my desire that in acting on these inspirations, a message of hope is conveyed to the viewer.”

Hope is also a theme of Lemen’s work, which often uses strong female figures and overlapping imagery to create moods of movement and emotion. Her work is often autobiographical. “The images I create are excerpts from my own personal journey, reflections, usually described through metaphorical imagery, highlighting humanity and the human condition using the figure as an integral part of the story,” the California artist says. “What has the potential to change or evolve each time I create a new painting might be the focus. Each image is a small piece of the overall story—like paragraphs or chapters are to a novel that is being perpetually written. The paintings for this show are all new pieces, recently created over the last several months specifically for this show, and so reflect more current experiences. By sharing my personal reflections, I strive for my work to be relatable universally, and possibly even inspire a dialogue that encourages strength, awareness and openness.”

In Lemen’s *Promise*, a childlike figure floats in a sea of mixing color as hands reach out to touch the pale, nude form. “On the easel, it started with abstract marks on the surface, and I painted into the marks to pull the image out from the abstract. As my paintings develop, they morph and shape-shift into what eventually becomes the finished image...” Lemen says. “Prior to the start of the painting, I think the imagery and intentions were brewing in me for a couple years, really, following a serious car accident I was involved in in 2015. I wanted to capture the feelings that spawned from that, both as a singular moment, and as a lasting moment in time, and how one split second of time essentially can guide the course of the future and, most of all, remind us of what’s most important. Its overall message is one of gratitude, compassion and trust. It’s a point of reflection for me, and I made it in hopes that it can carry its own positive energy out to others as those who have guided and helped me have done when I’ve needed it. The title of the painting is the title of the song that was playing in my car at the time I was hit.”

Rees’ images often invoke a mood or a



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Sergio Lopez, *Falling in Love*, oil on canvas mounted on panel, 9½ x 4½”

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Emanuele Dascanio, *Waiting For Those Days*, pastel on paper, 15¾ x 22”

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Marc Scheff, *Wolfdream*, oil and pencil with gold leaf under ArtResin resin, 14 x 11 x 5”



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feeling with just one color, a primary color that jump-starts a narrative that is guided by his subjects' pose and look of intense determination. He describes his work as "a mix of classical realism and impressionism, with active brushwork foiled against delicate beauty," he says, adding that "each [work] portrays a muse of what I find to be at the base of the human experience and the inspiration for most of my work—dance and movement, music and the creation of the visual arts,

and the interconnectivity of them all."

For *Dust and Drums; Dance of the Fulani*, Rees portrays the dance of a Fulani tribal woman. "African rhythm and movement displays a very fundamental human experience. It is curious and beautiful that tribes across the country, and cultures across the world, share similar movements in dance even if those cultures don't have direct contact. It shows how much the beautiful movements of our body are

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Daniel Gerhartz,
Remembering, oil on
canvas, 40 x 30"

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Tim Rees, *Dust and
Drums; Dance of the
Fulani*, oil on canvas,
72 x 60"



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a subtle connection we all share. This particular move of the Fulani dance tribe was selected because of its similarity to the motions of so many other cultural dances I have observed,” the Arizona painter says, adding that other works in the show are inspired by music and Greek mythology. “Each painting suggests subtle hints of what I think the most beautiful works contain—a sense of movement or dance, lyrical musical quality, and a beauty that (hopefully) will cause one’s heart to flutter. None of the muses stand alone, but work in tandem to help describe the human spirit.”

Scheff’s works are not only paintings, but also have sculptural qualities as he builds up layers of resin on which he paints two-dimensional images that, when stacked together within the resin, reveal three-dimensional faces. “I started

working with ArtResin a little over a year ago and spent some time exploring the media and seeing what it would look like combined with my traditional drawing work. I continue to spend time building my own molds and kits and finding new ways to create in almost every piece,” he says. “For this show, the process of mixing and pouring these visible layers feels both exposed and vulnerable while the form itself is strong and permanent-seeming. I am fascinated by this kind of juxtaposition, and how acceptance of contradictions strengthens us. Philosophers and gurus from Buddha to MLK have spoken to this kind of acceptance, how it builds fortitude and compassion, and how deeply both are required of us as a human race. This might be a cliché, but after a milestone birthday last year I find myself inspired to

look unflinchingly in my own mirror, and to find inspiration in my own incongruities.”

Scheff continues, “I’ve been reading some art and philosophy lately, Edgar Payne, Joseph Campbell, some Stoics, a Taoist translation I love, and some more contemporary figures. I’m struck at how many of the ideas about how we navigate the world exist outside of time to such a degree that someone in ancient Rome may require the same rigors and rituals to get through their day that we do. Put simply, we are all human. Our idols, angels and demons, they all eat sleep and breathe as we do. Someone else may ‘have it made’ in your eyes, while they themselves struggle to sleep every night with worry. Our obstacles and our passions are far from unique though we may always experience them as such. Our tragedy may be someone else’s wishful thinking. Our success may be vilified by another. And under all of it we all have the same humanity, the same basic needs, the same desires, the same fears. It’s hard to see beyond ourselves or even underneath. In my work I take an empathic view and try to see both.”

For Italian pastel artist Dascanio, his works in the show were motivated by a need to explore the thin area between life and death. “I would like to represent the enigma of my human perspective from what is life and what is death, and not give an explanation,” he says. “I’m not so arrogant to give some explanation—I just want to show my vision. No answer, only contemplation of the big question: is this lady asleep or is she dead? Here is the enigma.”

In *Waiting For Those Days*, Dascanio creates a thick enveloping darkness that threatens to consume his lace-wrapped figure. It’s a metaphor for life and death itself. “I just think that the days that we live are not made for waiting for more days,” he adds. “We don’t exist for a destination, but for the travel of our life.”

ARC Select 2017: Contemporary Figures will be on view at Rehs Contemporary through November 17. ●

ARC SELECT 2017: CONTEMPORARY FIGURES

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Where: Rehs Contemporary,
5 E. 57th Street, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10022

Information: (212) 355-5710, www.rehs.com