

The Efficacy of Representation: The Work of Laura Myntti

By Ivan Esteban Casteneda

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Since the early 1970s the commonplace position espoused by critics sympathetic to so-called postmodern artistic strategies has been to proclaim the death of painting. While celebrating the demise of traditional modernist painting and sculpture through the incursions of conceptual art, Douglas Crimp wrote in 1979 that "only a miracle can prevent [painting] from coming to an end." The most vigorous attack on painting and one that articulates the strongest theoretical argument has been advanced by the critic Benjamin Buchloh. Writing in response to the return to figuration in the early 1980s Buchloh argued that a return to figurative painting was nothing less than a retrograde movement that would foster damage to the aesthetic discourse that postmodernism had made possible. This discourse was seen not only as liberating, but to the critical theorist Buchloh, it was a discourse that was enabling the dismantling of the dominant ideology of modernist culture. Such a position has continuously been echoed by critics of figurative painting up to the present day. Figurative painting, it is posited, does not contribute to the political purpose of contemporary art, the discourse of which is increasingly focused on political and ideological polemics, especially in recent years, those centered on identity politics. What has been conspicuously missing from the discussion is the recognition of figurative painting's uniquely powerful representational value, something which is the result of the inherent conditions of its representational framework and political commitment aside, is where the true value of figurative painting resides.

Figurative painting implicates the viewer by the simple fact that it aesthetically interprets and translates the phenomenological space of human beings. This is the distinct result of figurative painting's structure - a structure in which the physiological conditions of human spatial extension are an inherent necessity of the representational form itself. It is precisely through the efficacious rendering of human physiological and psychological orientations that the work of Laura Myntti gives evidence of the unequivocal power of figurative painting.

Myntti's paintings of inhabited spaces render the topography of the phenomenological and psychological communication of human beings. In a tangibly synthetic fashion, Myntti represents the territorial architecture of human psychosomatic relations, a structure which invariably implicates human action within a phenomenologically tactile matrix of space. Within these structures of human relations walls, floors, furniture, and other spatial entities circumscribe, divide, extend, project, and otherwise participate in human relations and human dramas. As architecture joins up planes and sections, Myntti's figurations bracket and position psychological moods and psychosomatic relations through a kind of psychological architecture of figure and space. The figure in Myntti's work is thus incorporated in the space, in the literal sense of the word. The result is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's description of the architectural equation of body-house:

The body blossoms in the house. Now, what defines a house are 'sections,' that is to say, the pieces of differently oriented planes that provide flesh with its framework - foreground and background, horizontal and vertical sections, left and right, straight and oblique, rectilinear or curved... Without this respect and care painting is nothing.

Particularly in works like *The Party (No.2: Love Quadrangle)* and *The Party (No.3: The Bad News)* human psychological and sexual territorialization is represented as a conduit of spatio-temporal relations that are vividly composed through a fabric of claustrophobic space. We are at once reminded of the original meaning of the word sex: to cut, divide, separate, or section.

Myntti's paintings are an indication that every territory, every habitat is the site of a constellation of the quantitative; spatial-temporal and the qualitative; the body, flesh, gesture, gaze. In the *Marriage and Family* series, Myntti distills a spatial texture in agreement with what Merleau-Ponty described as erotic perception:

There is an erotic 'comprehension' not of the order of understanding, since understanding subsumes an experience, once perceived, under some idea, while desire comprehends blindly by linking body to body. Even in the case of sexuality, which has nevertheless long been regarded as pre-eminently the type of bodily function, we are concerned, not with the peripheral involuntary action, but with an intentionality which follows the general flow of existence and yields to its movements.

Myntti compellingly inscribes the intentionality of human relations through pictorial means that reclaim the merits of pictorial representation. Her medium: color, line, figuration, architecture, gives credence to the notion that the continued relevance of modern painting, as Van Gogh and Munch first showed us, is in its ability to make the material ascend and pass "into the thickness" of the aesthetic plane of composition. Through her penetratingly synthetic compositions of human psychological spaces, Myntti restores the efficacy of the representational image and reminds us that painting, far from being deceased, is very much alive and something that the future of art cannot do without.

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1. Crimp's critique of painting includes the essays published in *October*, ("Pictures," *October* 8 [Spring, 1979]; "The End of Painting," *October* [Spring 1981]) and was distilled in *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass. 1993). Other essential discussions on the demise of painting include Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting" *Art Forum*, 20, No.2 (October 1981), pp.40-47; Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), and Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture* (California, 1992), esp. "Representation, Appropriation, and Power." pp. 88-113.
 2. Benjamin Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," *October* 16 (Spring 1981), pp. 39-68.
 3. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "Percept, Affect, and Concept," *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomilson and Graham Burchell (London, 1994), pp. 174. In conclusion Deleuze and Guattari write: "Art begins not with flesh but with the house. That is why architecture is the first of all the arts." p. 176
 4. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York, 1962), p. 157.
 5. Hubert Damisch, *La Technique de la peinture a l'huile* (Paris, 1988).

