
Collaboration: ‘Unrealism’ could be the next new thing

Gareth Harris

A Miami exhibition by two titans of the art world argues for the dominance of figuration over abstraction in the internet era



‘Drawing 36 (after Flink)’ (2015) by Glenn Brown ©Gagosian Gallery

An exhibition of figurative painting and sculpture opening in Miami this week has piqued the interest of art professionals. Its organisers, gallerist Larry Gagosian and former Los Angeles museum director Jeffrey Deitch, two of the art world’s biggest hitters, are collaborating for the first time.

Unrealism, a five-day show at the Moore Building in Miami’s Design District featuring more than 60 artists from the 1980s to today, will be a major draw for those visiting Art Basel Miami Beach this week. Craig Robins, chief executive of the Dacra real estate development company, engineered the event. “The show came about because Craig offered me the space,” Gagosian says in an email. “I reached out to Jeffrey as a partner.”

The exhibition was inspired by a group of emerging artists — Ella Kruglyanskaya, Jamian Juliano-Villani, Tala Madani, Sascha Braunig, Emily Mae Smith — Deitch says in another email exchange. “Most of them are young women who are creating great new figurative paintings that reflect a contemporary vision,” he explains. “We decided to present this new work in the context of some of the best figurative painters and sculptors of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s generations.”

And the cryptic title? “*Unrealism* refers to the challenge of portraying contemporary reality where the real and the unreal are often confused,” Deitch says. Gagosian is blunter: “Jeffrey came up with the title and I think it’s a good one. Kind of like he coined a word.”

The artist mix is intriguing as well as astute. Established figures such as Marlene Dumas, Jenny Saville, John Currin, Jeff Koons and Glenn Brown feature alongside a younger generation of artists, including Turner Prize nominee Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, 25-year-old Canadian video artist Chloe Wise and New York-based street artist Swoon.

Other standouts include German painter and sculptor Jana Euler, whose multi-layered practice straddles abstraction and photo-realism, and Nigerian artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby, known for her moving, diasporic scenes rendered in mixed media on paper.

The New York dealer Jack Shainman represents Yiadom-Boakye as well as four other artists in the show, including Kerry James Marshall. “My works are on loan to the exhibition, which I think is a great platform,” he says.

So is it a selling show? Gagosian says: “Hopefully.” Deitch says: “Miami, during the art fair week, probably has the largest and most enthusiastic audience for new art in the world.”

New York-based art adviser Lisa Schiff is more candid. “This is a for-profit week in Miami and a for-profit show. This is a painting show, the candy of the post-internet artists. It’s über-commercial,” she says.

Why figuration, and why now? “I believe it stems not just from abstract fatigue, but also from an exploration of the body and the self within the new condition of being, which is the internet,” Schiff says.



Urs Fischer’s ‘Zhou Yinghua’ (2014)
©Ali Walker



'Doorway to Whitney' (2011-15) by Joe Coleman ©Jean Vong

She points to a historic run of abstraction stemming from Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, leading to 21st-century versions of Abstract Expressionism via Christopher Wool, Glenn Ligon, Sterling Ruby and Wade Guyton. "All used different technological means of creating painting. Then a slew of young artists followed suit, often in a less interesting manner," she adds.

The tussle between abstraction and figuration is something that has pre-occupied artists and writers for the past century, says Omar Kholeif, the Manilow senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. "In the visual arts, we have recently had a major reappraisal of the political history of abstraction with *Adventures of the Black Square* at London's Whitechapel Gallery. Naturally there will be a move back to considerations of figuration in art. I think it's a great moment to consider these parallel histories and influences. Whether this is the right show to do it, in a commercial context, I am not sure, but it's certainly worth a consideration and re-appraisal."

I press Gagosian on whether there is anything left to say in the field of figurative art.

"That's like asking if there's anything new in the field of abstraction. You're not sure if there is anything new until you see it," he says. Deitch stresses: "The exhibition will show that after a decade when the art dialogue has been focused on conceptually oriented abstraction, the wind is shifting, and some of the most exciting new art is figurative painting."

Both men are household names (in art world households, at least), eliciting awe and resentment in equal measure with their enterprises and innovations. Gagosian opened his first gallery in Los Angeles in 1980, and has since built an empire encompassing 15 spaces across three continents: the latest is in London's Grosvenor Hill.

Deitch's career has also been far-reaching. In 1979, he developed and co-managed Citibank's art advisory services. He ran his New York gallery from 1996 to 2010 before becoming director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles — a post he left in July 2013 after a



Chris Ofilli's 'Innervisions . . . Too High' (1998) ©Victoria Miro Gallery

bruising tenure marked by internal disputes. He is now back in New York, working on historical and contemporary exhibition projects, some of them for-profit.

Who will benefit from Deitch and Gagosian's joint venture? "Miami," replies Lisa Austin, an art adviser based in the city, "in that we could use all the great shows we can, and the public can enjoy this without buying a ticket. Gagosian, as some of the participating artists are his [11 artists out of 61 are represented by Gagosian, including Richard Prince]; finally, Deitch will remind people that he can curate a good show."

'Unrealism', Moore Building, Miami, December 2-6. miami.com/moore-building

Photographs: Gagosian Gallery; Ali Walker; Jean Vong; Victoria Miro Gallery