

SURREAL SELVES

GIVEN THE CAPACITY OF TODAY'S DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY to generate virtual worlds and fantastical avatars, it is remarkable that young artists turn to painting to produce new permutations of the human body. Sascha Braunig (Canadian, b. 1983), Erik Thor Sandberg (American, b. 1975), and Aya Uekawa (Japanese, b. 1979) tackle the centuries-old challenge of creating a compelling representation of the figure with only paint, brushes, and a two-dimensional surface as their tools. At the same time, they infuse that traditional approach with topical content, creating disquieting images that address contemporary anxieties and desires.

Their work exposes deeply personal visions, a strategy that has suffered criticism and disfavor over the last 50 years as a result of the strong influence of minimalist abstraction and conceptual art—visual languages that favor formal and theoretical content over the overtly emotional and biographical. These artists have also chosen to set aside more spontaneous ways of painting as well as the ready-made, photographed, and manufactured components that characterize much of contemporary artistic practice. Instead, they focus on intricate compositions, illusionistic effects, and technically demanding materials (Uekawa's application of delicate gold leaf, for instance).



Erik Thor Sandberg. *Swing*, 2009. © Erik Sandberg, courtesy of CONNERSMITH.

Recent artists who have successfully presented figurative painting have often done so cocooned by a reading of their work as deliberately ironic or filled with rigorous social and historical references. Their art consequently retained an intellectual and

distanced quality more in keeping with the preferences of many leading collectors, critics, and scholars. Refreshingly, Braunig, Sandberg, and Uekawa are not self-conscious or ironic in their use of figuration. Instead, they fluidly combine a variety of



TOP TO BOTTOM: Aya Uekawa. *Mimic Dream*. 2011. Courtesy of the artist and ARNDT, Berlin.

Sascha Braunig. *Fister*. 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Foxy Production, New York. Photo by Mark Woods.

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art-historical moments and embrace “high” and “low” sources alike. Beyond early 20th-century Surrealism’s interest in embodying the fantasies and fears of the human subconscious, one can detect inspirations as diverse as Renaissance painting, Japanese art, Op Art, transforming toys, and the hybrid life forms of science fiction and fantasy.

Sandberg’s work belongs to an impressive lineage of allegorical figuration in the landscape, extending from Renaissance painters like Hieronymous Bosch and Lucas Cranach the Elder to the 17th-century classicist Nicholas Poussin. However, in Sandberg’s heroically depicted yet strangely posed nudes, one might recognize a pessimistic view of the present-day search for self-realization and spirituality through connections with the natural world. A figure in *Swing* cuts away a tree limb that supports her, imperiling her position as nearby tethered birds fail in their struggle to take flight. In Sandberg’s assessment of the human condition, the quest for a pure state of nature in our urban, technologically mediated culture appears futile, delusional, and even self-damaging.

Uekawa also cites the influence of Cranach and other painters of his period, but she blends their realism with the mannered expressionism of Noh theater masks and the flat spatial organization of Japanese painting to produce strikingly dislocated images of women. She incorporates gold leaf as an allusion to both Western and Japanese decorative traditions, weaving a complex iconography to encompass her experiences growing up in Japan and moving to the United States, as well as the variety of roles that she has performed in pursuing her career as an artist and becoming a new mother. In *Mimic Dream*, the hair of a woman resembling Uekawa twists into the tentacles of a mimic octopus, an animal that changes its skin to camouflage itself from danger as it swims from one location to the next.

In Sascha Braunig’s *Fister*, the classic format of the portrait bust is disrupted by a profile transformed into a knot of intestinal tubes. This grotesque metamorphosis, emerging from a sumptuously rendered fur coat and exquisitely executed, light-bathed hands, suggests the surfacing of anxieties and attitudes normally hidden by a physical and metaphorical “skin.” Braunig’s aggressive and oddly humorous distortions reveal a more multi-faceted and forceful representation of the female psyche than conventional depictions of women as beautiful, sexually desirable bodies allow.

Like Sandberg and Uekawa, Braunig updates representational traditions in a technically masterful and uninhibitedly imaginative manner. The works of all three artists point to a fertile path forward for figurative painting as a means of contemplating the psychological complexities of 21st-century identity and experience.