

## **Humanity: Contemporary Art of the Humane Image**

Curatorial Essay by Gregory Scheckler © 2006

This exhibit centers around meticulously crafted artwork that both contains images of or about people as well as imagery that provokes us to consider human connections and concerns that we all share, the humane. From exacting realism to exceptional abstraction, contributing to this exhibit is the generous participation of each artist (in order from the entry of the exhibit, left and then clockwise around the gallery): Martinho Correia, Gregory Scheckler, Barry Goldstein, Kevin Grass, Kay Canavino, Jane Catlin and Laura Christensen.

Without the support of the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts we couldn't have put this show together. I would like to thank the Department of Fine & Performing Arts and its chair Dr. Anthony Gengarelly for his support and astute advice regarding curatorial practices. Molding of MCLA's Gallery 51 from a rough brainstorm into a dynamic reality are gallery director Jonathon Secor, and gallery manager Sean Riley, both of whom provided savvy and elegant installation and marketing of the art, along with the help of many staff like Kara Perry, Hannah Macksey, James Harkins, Kim Young, Emily Silver, and Veronica Bosley (who single-handedly saved the day Monday before the opening). We also owe gratitude to MCLA President, Dr. Mary Grant without whose willingness to take a risk on the arts and cultural economies this gallery would not exist. MCLA Gallery 51 is also supported in part through a Massachusetts Cultural Council grant, for which we are deeply indebted.

### **Mixing and Matching Kinds of Representation in Visual Art**

For the representational artist, each artwork becomes a lens or window through which we can imagine and reflect on the world. But artist's materials literally cannot allow mere mimicry of the visual. However convincing the artwork's imagery and illusionism, under normal gallery lighting conditions even the brightest titanium white paint is never as bright as day, nor blackest pigment as dark as night. The artist must translate, transcribe and change what is seen to match the aesthetic needs and principles of the media, the concepts, and the images. As a result of this mixing and matching, great artwork is more than a window – it is collaboration from artist to audience, person to person. In this sense, visual art is itself a humane connection.

If we are to consider the humane, we must also consider the decision-making that motivates those aspects of humanity that we most value and then choose to represent. Many of those decisions root through various branches of critical thinking, including literary and spiritual traditions, and artistic explorations that date back over thousands of years. In the artworks of this exhibit, some main considerations include *perceptual realism* – images that look like what we experience visually; *conceptual realism* – images that move away from the perceptual and more towards what we think, as based on real experiences; and *realistic idealism* – images borne out of abstract principles or ideals that came from experiencing and interpreting the world.<sup>1</sup> As such, many of the artworks in this exhibit also overlap with themes such as art's craft methods, the history of

representational and figurative art, the roles of the human imagination, portraiture, and the changing subtleties of memory and appearance.

Centuries earlier, Renaissance Italian artists spoke of *disegno pratico* versus *disegno interno*, separating practical engineering and layout that required some artistry from inspired or imagined visions for a new composition which they felt were the mysterious and even sacred aspect of art-making.<sup>2</sup> Also a variety of critics and writers, inspired by philosophies of Rousseau and Proudhon, recognized the religious dogma and spiritual concerns of many of the renaissance artists, making a further distinction between *dogmatic realism* and *critical realism*. The former refers to art that is representational and realistic as a result of articles of faith, whereas the latter appears realistic out of the artist's non-dogmatic searching through the visual world of meanings and allegories. All of the artwork in this exhibit tends towards the latter critical type.

These complexities also can demonstrate to us what we think the artist, as a thinking and humane person, is supposed to be doing when he or she makes art. Most audiences expect – rightly so – that art is expressive, entertaining, insightful and worth our effort to investigate. But how does the artist begin that process? In this exhibit, each artwork began with truths of images, truths of media, and truths of the mind. In other words, at the very core of these representational, figurative art traditions – at the foundation of what makes these artworks possible for us to experience today – is what the 20<sup>th</sup>-century painter Mark Tansey has said is “an embodiment of the very problem we face with the notion ‘reality’,” that is, the errancy versus artistic aptitude of our pivotal balancing of what we think, feel, and dream with what we know about and can see in the world. Figurative art, portraiture, and allegorical representations all become an art of balancing perception and experience with thought.

For example, it's quite impossible to view Barrie Goldstein's and Martinho Correia's intense portraits without balancing one's own experiences with the lives and thoughts of real people during times of war, sacrifice, and peace. And similarly, one cannot view Kay Canavino's imagery, or Kevin Grass's and Laura Christensen's inventions, without gaining a sense of connection with other people, whether by their appearance as dream-like apparitions or by how we remember long-gone individuals. The moment one realizes the human and environmental sources of Catlin's work, the imagery ceases to mimic prior generation's abstract painting – connecting instead with humanity through images inspired partially by modern science's microscope and telescope imagery. In fact, many of the techniques exhibited in these artworks cannot be accomplished by most artists. Thus this is not a show of the ordinary, not another rehash of post-Duchampian found-object installations or post-Fluxus performance art, or Minimalist or Pop Art conceptual directives. All of those styles can also be good art. But they don't require technical craft focused on representations of vision, they are not necessarily forged around connecting with other people. Instead the craftwork exhibited here creates the virtuoso, or what is extraordinary, rare and amazing about people and what they can do.

For that reason the artworks in this exhibit go somewhat against the grain of art fashions today, redefining 'contemporary' less in terms of a fashionable art theory or a litany of

morose political or art theoretical meanderings, and more in terms of the imagery's representations, relevancy, meanings, and extraordinary beauty<sup>3</sup>. In fact the artists here each rely on craft techniques that are quite uncommon in contemporary art, anathema to the more extreme forms of now-outdated postmodern art theories that preferred jargon-laden variations of relativism over scientifically-demanding, dextrous vision-making. Where legions of mid and late-20<sup>th</sup> century artists quite on purpose denied the necessities of how to craft their chosen media, the artists in this exhibit very much attend to craft issues. And contrary to the theoretical claims of many art critics and artists during the beginning and middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup>, the artists have also found that their focus on human images in no way limits their creativity or capacity to be expressive. Actually the opposite: without our ability to interpret body language and nonverbal cues, we could not see how poignant the expressions of the individuals such as in Canavino's night portraits. Another example would be the visual truths of the artist's chosen design strategy, such as how wrested with sinew and line is Grass's *Crucifixion* compared to Correia's less linear and more tonal drawing on the same theme.

Perhaps the single most influential text related to these balancing acts is Ernst Gombrich's masterpiece, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1969, newest edition: 2000, Princeton University Press). Gombrich proposed that we cannot easily separate art from object, concept from percept, or illusion from representation. Contrary to the claims of earlier Abstract Expressionist and Minimalist innovators, Gombrich detailed how we must recognize the constant feedback cycle between what we represent and how we represent it. The artist is both making new forms and matching with existing concepts, values, memories, and schema. As a result, the fundamental concept for understanding artistry is one of balance, what Gombrich called 'mixing and matching.'

Thus we can understand how the artist who leans towards perceptual information is nonetheless sorting and arranging it, using concepts. And, the artist who leans towards conceptual groupings is also using perception and visual responses to the art. To some extent, we always are combining concept, percept, abstraction and experience. What matters is the balancing and ordering of the art's varied ingredients.

### **Interpreting the Art**

And which balances should you look for in these artworks? Besides the underlying philosophies and theories that the art reflects, you might create another straightforward grouping of two basic practices for how the artists dealt with human images and image-making. One focal point: the making of *new images from new images*, stemming from our naturalist heritage of directed, perceptual observation as based on the artist's searching visual experience of the contemporary world. At the extreme, this is pure perceptual realism. A second focal point: the making of *new images by interaction with existing images*, stemming from our idealist heritage of looking at measures, pattern-books, and existing artworks to manage how to create the human form in art. Pushed to its limits, this becomes realistic idealism – images from things we know but can't necessarily see with our eyes alone. Thus one might also ask whether or not the artwork

is showing us an image inspired by something that you could normally see, versus imagery that without the artist's innovations would normally be invisible.

The question becomes why did the artist choose to work with the new or existing images, or combinations of them, and how does that choice relate to the meanings of the art? Do these particular selections and emphases allow the artist to provoke meanings that other selections simply could not have accommodated? What kinds of reflections or provocations of the human or the humane do we see as a result of the artist's balancings?

**Martinho Correia's** artwork results from rigorous, directed observation of the human form using only the artist's eyes, wits, and knowledge. His artwork is both classical and realist – a fantastic, systematic, and radical example of art that is a new image from new images as experienced by the artist. We should note the very long academic tradition of art that that implies, and how such artworks take quite a long time to create. Thus it may be most accurate for us to recognize that Correia's work results from thousands of studies of his models, literally many visual exposures combined into one coherent new image. Such age-old painting traditions allow Correia's work to be astoundingly realistic, making every muscle, structure and texture of the human form's representation lead to a distinct and delicate psychology. By focusing in on the perceptual, Correia's work makes it possible for us to feel that we are immediately in the presence of the portrait, the figure, and the humanity of each specific individual in his art.

**Gregory Scheckler's** work connects with trends in many of the other artist's methods. Like Grass and Correia, his artwork relies on renaissance, academy, and realist traditions of working from observation. But his artwork also collages field study, photography, and images from art of the past. For example, in "Study after Prud'hon with Multiple Nuclear Reactions" three images juxtapose: a painting inspired by a famous academy drawing by Prud'hon, next to a night-time view of the Aurora Borealis (from photos Scheckler took in Wisconsin), beneath which is a lightning storm (based on plein aire studies of storms seen from here in the Berkshires). The visual repetition of s-curves create literal, formal connections among the three sets of imagery, a shared patterning. Unlike Correia's and most of Grass's work, which both in their combinations harmonize into one new image, by juxtaposing multiple images Scheckler's artworks create a sense of divergence, presenting parallels or multiple drafts of thoughts. In a world where it seems we are always multitasking, such multiple narratives (or pictures-within-pictures) can sometimes be a highly realistic way of representing reality. This tactic dates back to predella panels and multiple inlays such as in renaissance altarpieces and frescos.

In contrast, **Barry Goldstein's** exacting compositions create paralleled diptychs, by adding a written interview of each sitter, placed on the wall next to each photo. This provides us new insights into each sitter's complex, unseen state of mind over a time period that was not included in the photo itself. The photograph contains a specific exposure, whereas the interviews contain an entirely different time exposure. When these two exposures are combined, we find a real human interaction and questioning between the artist and the individual depicted. These are touching and often difficult stories that relate closely to our terrifying human capacity for war, specifically recent conflicts in

Iraq. Trained as a physician and biophysicist, Dr. Goldstein's techniques bring forward a focused, case-study approach to complex international events. This humanizes these events, and helps us see them in the form of humane stories. Another aspect that humanizes these portraits is their connection with historical images. Goldstein's use of a profoundly dark background reflects Rembrandt's many portraits, as well as Caravaggio's preferences.

**Kevin Grass** worked from a disparate combination of observation plus purely invented imagery. Where Correia's work leans towards perceptual realism, Grass's leans towards a conceptual realism. For example, the figure in "Ascension" is based on a series of his own self-portrait studies that he later adapted here, into a new and difficult spiritual statement about a mortality constrained, yet nonetheless at peace. With its intense, invented blue background color, the artwork stands firmly within Northern Renaissance conceptual traditions. Thus his artistic message aims less at the specific, realist individual and more towards a spiritual content that can apply to many people. His skull drawing shows a quite vivid example of this dual tension between what an artist sees (percept) versus what an artist knows (concept) – literally a cutaway approach to form that is not possible without significant anatomical understanding, an imagined x-ray vision. This drawing too is partially a self-portrait. Grass's art gains a dreamlike quality thanks to the incredibly imaginative use of the artist's choice to tip the art's balance towards concept a bit more than towards percept.

**Kay Canavino** took the darkness of night, when we are normally near-blind, and dramatically altered it by using her innovative light-painting technique to enliven each portrait. Not only did the artist create fine art photos out of a time of day which is not normally visible to us, but she also selected to create images of people who work at night. These are people who are invisible for most of us – we're asleep when they're awake. They keep the world functioning while we rest. The lighting thus adds real theatre to each portrait, as if the person is emerging from an unknown world of shadows or darkened dreams, the lonely quiet of night. In another sense, the art also reveals a critical aspect of humanity related to how we alter our environments to suit our needs, dotting the darkness with our own miniature stars that then allow us to see. You might in this discover a more sinister, brooding variation of ex-President George H.W. Bush's happy-go-lucky calls for a "thousand points of light." This environmental sensibility relays against Catlin's work, which also includes environmental concerns.

**Jane Catlin's** paintings may seem to be the most distant from the other artworks in this exhibit. Hers is the only work here that does not rely on traditional figurative representations. Instead, Catlin developed her abstractions out of her rigorous study of the body's interior biology and chemistry. This is almost entirely based on pre-existing images inspired by using late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century technology and science. In other words, Catlin uses sources based on events that are normally unseen, being too small or too far away for normal human vision. Like Kevin Grass's work, Catlin's aims towards a sense of the universal – in this case the biology we all share. Her piece "Cosmos" links interior humanity with sources in the universe – that the same basic principles of chemistry that serve our bodies also apply to a larger cosmos, or vice versa. In fact we

know today that this is literally true, that every atom in a human being resulted from distant explosive supernovae creating carbon, iron and other heavier matter out of lightweight hydrogen and helium. Catlin's abstractions fall within the range of realistic idealism, punctuated by highly realistic natural-science observations. This links us to two more artists who relied on primarily photographic imagery, Canavino and Goldstein. Like Catlin's work, these two artists found techniques that allowed them to aim towards events that you cannot usually see with the naked eye.

**Laura Christensen** uses a very subtle variation of juxtaposition and layering in that she combined both found art, such as antique photos or sometimes images from art history, with hand-crafted, new original adaptations in both oil paint and fine woodworking. Often in Christensen's artwork you cannot easily decide what was old versus what is new or altered, or what is realistic versus what is fantastic. Who were the individuals in the photos? Why were these photos discarded, left for sale? Such questions may cause you to wonder about the role of invention in among our memories and willingness to make-believe. This can result in a great deal of wry humor, which I hope you see especially evident in her artwork "Shifts and Thrushes." But because of the sliding door mechanism, you can literally see only one half of the artwork at a time. You must use your memory to consider relationships with the other half. This strategy allows Christensen's work to cut to the very core of Gombrich's "making and matching," which literally becomes a necessary, physical aspect of your interaction with her art as you open and close the sliding doors. There are no passive interactions with such art, and the viewer must be active, alive, full of recall – precisely similar to the deeper symbolic content of her images. Christensen's artworks thus not only reflect the humane, but cause the viewer to enact it.

## **Artist Biographies**

Besides the similarities among their artworks, the artists in this exhibit also share a variety of histories of art and art education. For example, Correia, Scheckler, and Christensen all share distinct links with contemporary academy methods. Correia is currently faculty at the Angel Academy of Art, where he also studied, and taught Scheckler during recent workshops. Correia's teacher, M. John Angel, studied with Pietro Annigoni, who studied with various Italian and French academicians whose lineage tracks back through history directly to teachers of Leonardo and Michelangelo. Scheckler and Christensen both pursued and then abandoned graduate studies at the New York Academy of Art, where they both studied drawing, anatomy, and classical form. Christensen's and Scheckler's teachers at the New York Academy track back through the French Academy to methods of Ingres, David, and Gerome. Along a slightly different confluence of figurative art traditions, Grass and Scheckler both went to the same undergraduate art school where they took drawing and anatomy courses from the same professors, some of whom were products of the German and Italian academy system, whereas some had distinct links to the pivotal experimental school at Black Mountain College. Black Mountain, led by Josef Albers, taught the most well-known Modernist abstract painters. Similarly, Catlin studied at one of the nation's oldest art schools, the

Rhode Island School of Design which also had strong ties to Black Mountain and the heritage of abstract painting methods in America. She now teaches art education at Utah State University, where Christensen and Scheckler studied with her after they left New York. Canavino and Goldstein also enjoy links with various college and university traditions, as do, in fact all of the artists, who all have college degrees. Finally, all of the artists have been or currently are teachers of various kinds, thus being members of one or another kind of contemporary academy.

In order from the exhibit's entrance then clockwise around the gallery:

**Martinho Correia** spends half of the year painting and working on commissions in South America, and the other half teaching figure painting and drawing at the highly-acclaimed Angel Academy of Art, in Florence, Italy. Before teaching in Italy, Correia earned a degree in fine arts from the University of Calgary followed by a degree in art education from the University of British Columbia, after which he spent six years teaching art in the public school system in Calgary. This is his first exhibit in the United States.

**Gregory Scheckler** originally intended to become either a rock-n-roll drummer or mechanical engineer, he ended up graduating with a degree in Modern and Classical Languages from the University of Notre Dame, and degrees in Art from Washington University in St. Louis, and Utah State University. He studied figure drawing at the New York Academy of Art, and figure painting recently in workshops at the Angel Academy of Art. He has exhibited widely, with collectors residing as nearby as New York City and as far away as Tokyo, Japan. Currently he serves as Assistant Professor of Visual Art at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, where he teaches courses that integrate visual observation with artistry.

**Barry Goldstein** is Associate Professor of Medical Humanities at the University of Rochester. Originally trained as a physician and biophysicist, he became a photographer interested in social documentary and medical themes. His portraits of medical students in the New York City morgues after the 9/11 tragedy resulted in the book "Being There" (2005, University of Rochester Press). Photographs and interview excerpts shown in the Humanity exhibit are part of a work-in-progress dealing with the experiences of soldiers who are Iraq war veterans.

**Kevin Grass** graduated from Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Georgia. Grass is now the Assistant Professor of Art at St. Petersburg College where teaches all levels of drawing and painting. His artworks have been exhibited widely throughout Florida, North Carolina, and Georgia. He is the recipient of numerous awards as well as many public art commissions. Grass's paintings are also currently showcased in a major solo exhibit at the Orland Museum of Art, in Florida

Formerly of the Boston area, **Kay Canavino** graduated from Northeastern University and earned a Professional Diploma from the New England School of Photography. She relocated to Adams in 2003 where she purchased the East Renfrew schoolhouse to be her

permanent photography studio. Since 1988 she has worked with such diverse clients as Gillette Corporation, New England Medical Center, Harvard University, and MIT. Canavino is fast-becoming one of the Berkshire's well-known fine art and commercial photographers. Her work was recently exhibited at the Berkshire Museum and is included in corporate, museum and private collections.

**Jane Catlin** is Associate Professor of Art Education at Utah State University. A graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, she is the recipient of several awards and grants, including a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant and Utah Arts Council Fellowship. Not too long ago she lived in Mali, West Africa, where she studied mud cloth painting. She has exhibited extensively across the United States, including the Millennium Art Center in Washington, D.C. A frequent speaker and advocate, Jane recently returned from Seoul, Korea, where she exhibited at the Gail Art Museum and lectured as a Visiting Professor at Sungshing Women's University and Kookmin University.

**Laura Christensen**, widely recognized for her work as the Education Coordinator at MASS MoCA, is also Adjunct Assistant Professor of Art at MCLA. Christensen is an accomplished professional artist with an international record, having shown recently at the Arts Center of the Capital Region (Troy, NY), the Tweed Museum of Art (Duluth, MN), Elston Fine Arts (NY, NY) and Offenes Haus Oberwart (Oberwart, Austria). In 1999 Ms. Christensen was an artist-in-residence at the internationally-renowned Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass, CO. This spring you will also find her artwork in the forthcoming show "Boxed Sets" at Kidspace at MASS MoCA.

---

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of these evolving practices and categories, see Carl Goldstein's *Teaching Art: Academies and Schools from Vasari to Albers*, 1996: Cambridge University Press, as well as Edward Lucie-Smith's writings in *American Realism*, 1994: Thames & Hudson.

<sup>2</sup> See Josef Meder's discussions, in *The Mastery of Drawing* 1978: Abaris Books

<sup>3</sup> A good starting point for understanding some of the harsh divisions between realistic, representational art versus a museumized world of theory-driven conceptual artworks was popularized by Stevens, "Art: Revival of Realism" in *Newsweek* (7 June 1982) pp. 64-70.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see some quite antagonist attacks in p.115-116 in Herbert Read, *Art & Society* 1966: Schocken Books. Read derides academic, figurative art as being "...generally sentimental and always utterly insignificant, it is to be regarded as a commercial commodity which is neither aware of its fatuity nor yet ignorant of its fate..." One wonders how Read could make such a conclusion when academic art sometimes included profoundly insightful, academic artworks like Eakins' disturbing *Gross Clinic* or Gerome's critical commentary on religion *Prayers in the Mosque*. Nonetheless, Read, along with Greenberg and other critics, set a tone of absolutist statements against representational painting and drawing that was quite vogue in the 1960's and 1970's. As a result, there are today similarly antagonistic counter-movements that market themselves as anti-modern traditionalism.