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Reviewed: "Is Realism Relevant?" at Conner Contemporary

Posted by [John Anderson](#) on Sep. 21, 2011 at 9:15 am



"Receptivity," copyright Erik Thor Sandberg, courtesy Conner Contemporary Art

It's a probing question: Is realism relevant? That's what Conner Contemporary is asking with its season opener, which includes paintings from **Erik Thor Sandberg**, **Nathaniel Rogers**, and **Katie Miller**. To go by these works, the answer, clearly, is yes. These paintings show an amazing handling of paint and an astute understanding of how to create narratives that invite lengthy, sometimes uncomfortable stares. But is it realism?

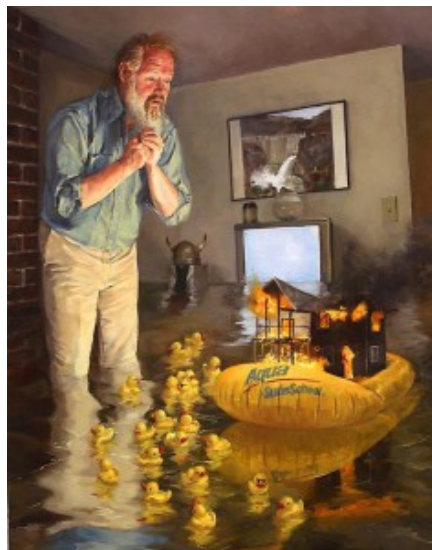
Realism depends on the representation of form through light and dark values, and the simulation of texture, be it stone, dirt, foliage, or flesh. Fittingly, the works in the front gallery, Sandberg's "Reparatory Gestures," possess all of these qualities. The architecture of four 88-inch-long curved panels commands the space, as the panoramic tales of nature's resurgence over man stretches into the gallery. "Receptivity" immediately captures your attention: A nude woman sits on a rock as countless varieties of birds, stretching across the sky into the horizon, land next to her and lay eggs at her feet. Even flightless birds, like ostriches and emus, share the craggy knoll with the woman. Sandberg's technical skill illustrating the variety within the species is impressive, and it serves as a visual metaphor for variation within all species. But these birds from various continents and temperate zones are clustered together in one composition, and so Sandberg's work takes a turn toward the surreal. Sure, there are no melting clocks, but calling this "realism" doesn't feel quite right. When things start to get strange, at what point has realism become surrealism? When you've included enough birds to make Artemis, the Greek goddess of wild animals, nervous? When you have a dozen nude women wrestling on a picnic table while a stuffed animal roasts on an open grill, as depicted in another painting? Undoubtedly, everything in these paintings is representational. But realism?



"Tiny Miss Diva's Puppy Style," copyright Katie Miller, courtesy Conner Contemporary Art

The subjects of control and manipulation tie Sandberg's work to Miller's. But rather than man's relationship with nature, Miller's paintings remark on the control adults use to cultivate obscene levels of cuteness from small children and pets. "The Fancy of Babes," which is Miller's first show, is nicely timed with [the recent](#) brouhaha over the program *Toddlers and Tiaras*, on which a three-year old dressed like Julia Roberts' prostitute from *Pretty Woman*. Three large paintings dominate the gallery, each depicting a child in makeup so heavy that the extreme cuteness borders precariously close to erotic fetish. "Tiny Miss Diva's Puppy Style" depicts a nude toddler with bikini tan lines and a French mani-pedi. The fat in her chest is suggestive of breasts. She stands contrapasto, pouting, cheeks stained with blush, her eyelids heavy with liner and mascara, not unlike **Tammy Faye Bakker**.

There's comic relief in each painting, in the form of an equivalently preened pet. Tiny Miss Diva leads a Yorkshire terrier by a delicate pink ribbon. The poor dog wears a tiara, fluffy pink sweater, skinny jeans, and little boots that suggest a tiny heel. It also has Tammy Faye eyes. All of this would be absurd—surreal, even—if it weren't for the reality that plenty of adults treat their children and pets like dolls, parading them around at pageants for cash prizes. Unlike Sandberg's paintings, which are allegorical assumptions of what happens to the earth after man, there is a heavy dose of reality TV within Miller's work. Realism? Perhaps, but it's over-the-top in its depiction, hyper-reality augmented by saccharine-sweet pink sunsets.



"Distraction," copyright Nathaniel Rogers, courtesy Conner Contemporary Art

Rogers is tucked away in the gallery usually reserved for multimedia, and his paintings juxtapose well with Miller's. Rogers' work hits that part of the psyche not quite defined by Freud's framework of id, ego, and super-ego. This is sub-ego stuff, channeling the tween impulse to become distracted from reality. Rogers' subjects transgress adulthood with escapist fantasies: They play dress-up and avoid putting out those metaphorical fires of responsibility, which are represented as actual fires. In "Burning News," a woman in a Wonder Woman shirt stands in front of a television screen, in the middle of a wooded field. The television shows a burning wooded field, and the wooded field in the background is also on fire. Her arms are out-stretched, as if weighing which reality is greater: the reality of the fire on television or the reality of the fire around her. "Distraction" depicts an older man wringing his hands over the loss of his scale-model home, engulfed in flames. It floats on a raft in his flooded living room. In the background, we see a goldfish trapped in a bowl. The jokes aren't subtle, the dilemmas are forced, but just as Rogers' protagonists are enveloped in escapist fun, it's hard for us to turn our eyes away. Realism? Perhaps only as real as imagination and pretend allow.

Is realism relevant? Supposedly. Museumgoers flocking to see 17th century Dutch still-life paintings will tell you it is. Contemporary art has preferred other things, like splatters of paint, media, and installation. Representational painting was never fully abandoned, it simply became less popular. Its periodic resurgence reminds us that nothing is more astounding than skilled painting, regardless of the subject. It appeals to the lowest common denominator, and that includes tech-savvy mediaphiles. While each artist in the exhibition at Conner Contemporary is addressing a present issue, the presentation employs surrealism, hyper-realism, imagination, and above all else the absurd. But they do so with representational imagery that often borders on the photo-realistic. Perhaps what the exhibition means to ask is if representational painting is still relevant. Much like [Abe Vigoda](#), it [is still alive](#) and well.