



Narrative Figuration at Taittinger

APRIL 2021



Gérard Fromanger, Tout Doit Disparaître, série « Boulevard des Italiens, 1971. Oil on canvas, 39.37 x 39.37 in. Courtesy of Richard Taittinger Gallery.

Narrative Figuration: 60s and 70s

Richard Taittinger Gallery

March 13 through May 16, 2021

By ANTHONY HADEN-GUEST, April 2021

Narrative Figuration, now up at the Taittinger Gallery at 154 Ludlow, is the first show in the US to focus on a widely underknown chapter in the story of how New York had been propelled by the heft of Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko and the Ab Exes generally into replacing Paris as art world capital: The Parisian counter-attack. Several artists in this show, co-curated by Richard Taittinger and Yoyo Maeght, had been in *Mythologies Quotidiennes, Everyday Mythologies*, a 1964 show at the Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris, which first presented *Narrative Figuration*, the name attached to a group of artists who had individually made a point of shunning the abstraction which had long ruled in galleries and institutions world-wide.

Abstraction was no longer by then dominant in the US, Pop being the new power, but the New York presence in Europe was as strong as ever. Ileana Sonnabend, divorced from Leo Castelli in 1959, moved to Paris and, very much with her exes's support, opened a gallery there in May 1963. Rauschenberg, Johns, Oldenburg, Warhol and Lee Bontecou were among artists in the opening show, *American Pop* was promptly attacked by Paris critics as Cultural Imperialism, Act II. But the following year was worse for the Euros.

Rauschenberg won the Golden Lion, the grand prize for painting at the Venice Biennale, often a French trophy. The surge of dark rumors – one which made it into *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, a book by the French-Canadian, Serge Guilbaut, ominously noted the presence of a US fleet in the Mediterranean – prefigured today's swelling Conspiracy Culture. Well, JFK and his administration had been open about finding in the openness and political freedom of the US art culture a usable resource against Cold War antagonists, and good for them, but Rauschenberg had won fair and square.

The image bank channeled by American Pop often represented US Soft Power, as with Warhol's Brillo boxes, Coca-Cola bottles and movie-star promo shots, but seldom conveyed story, except by inference, much less political messaging. There are striking exceptions, such as Warhol's 1972 *Vote for McGovern* print, an image of a lizard-green Richard Nixon, but Warhol blamed this for the IRS audit that followed and thereafter steered clear of politics.

Artists channeling Pop energies in Europe in those revolutionist years were less restrained. In France especially. Detournement, a practice of Guy Debord's Situationist International, involved repurposing commercial images against the culture which had produced them, as when they erased the texts from appropriated comics and ads, substituting their own deft sloganeering.



Éro, Going to Play Tennis, 1974. Alkyd paint on canvas, 65.75 x 39.38 in. Courtesy of Richard Taittinger Gallery.

Mythologies Quotidiennes, which opened after Rauschenberg's Venice win, was put together by two young artists, Bernard Rancillac, a Frenchman, Herve Telemaque from Haiti, and a critic, Gerald Gassiot-Talabot, whose statement dissed "the static derision of American Pop", promising that these artists would "demonstrate a subjective creativity that maintains the taste and the spirit of

European painting.” Rancillac stated that politics were part of the program, asking *Pour ceux que le fusil rebute, peut-il etre une arme?*

For those disgusted by guns can the paintbrush be a weapon?

The artists in the show were a multi-national group of 34 – included was Peter Saul, shortly to return to the US after years in Paris – and politics were indeed very much in the mix from the get-go. Telemaque let it be known that he had left New York for Paris because of racist harassment and Eduardo Arroyo was a refugee from Franco’s Spain. In May 1968, Gérard Fromanger, also in the show, set up the Atelier Populaire des Beaux-Arts, where he created prints which showed the flags of 21 nations from either side of the Iron Curtain, dripping with blood, and which he pasted on walls early every morning throughout that carved-into-history month.

Erro, an Icelandic artist, born Guomundur Guomundsson, was close to American Pop in his appetite for comix and mass media source materials but it’s hard to think of a Popster who would have turned out his image of Maoist Red Guards gazing greedily at you, the viewer, through the wide windows of your suburban American home. That painting is not in the show but powerful Errro work there includes *Tank-Part* on the upper half of which depicts a tank under heavy fire is atop a hill while beneath a threesome who seem to have arrived from a Japanese print prepare to have explicit sex but the effect is far from erotic.



Bernard Rancillac, Fin tragique d'un apotre de l'Apartheid, 1966. Screenprint on canvas, 28.74 x 36.22 in. Courtesy of Richard Taittinger Gallery.

The Fromangers in the gallery include *Everything Must Disappear*, a street scene dominated by a shop sign, sadly familiar nowadays, which announces *Total Liquidation* and *Massacre of Prices* and, yes, the shoppers are blood-red and phantom-like. This mixture of politics and a kind of strangeness which is very far from formulaic Surrealism can also be seen in Arroyo, who has a straightforward political work in the show and another which pictures a head of lettuce in six phases of being peeled into a human face

These works are very much figuration-based, as, and very much so, are the paintings of Jacques Monory. So too the Rancillacs, a performance portrait of James Brown and a clearly photo-based canvas with what, equally clearly, must be the ironic title, *The*

Tragic End of an Apostle of Apartheid, but generally these artists are highly unlike, except in their rejection of pure abstraction.

As is Cybele Valera, a Brazilian artist, who combines figural images, with areas of flat color, and Valerio Adami from Bologna, Italy, who uses areas of flat color and undulant black lines of unvarying width, a pictorial language so indebted to abstraction that it can take a moment to process the fact that the image is a female body in an unconventional pose. Herve Telemaque's *Green Contamination* likewise draws energy from its near approach to Minimalism. So what we see in this show is not just the rejection of abstraction, the bringing of anecdote and story back to art that those who put Everyday Mythologies together had proposed. It also predicted is going on around us with certain artists right now, the use of abstract and figurative aesthetics on the same canvas to their mutual strengthening. **WM**



ANTHONY HADEN-GUEST

Anthony Haden-Guest (born 2 February 1937) is a British writer, reporter, cartoonist, art critic, poet, and socialite who lives in New York City and London. He is a frequent contributor to major magazines and has had several books published including *TRUE COLORS: The Real Life of the Art World* and *The Last Party, Studio 54, Disco and the Culture of the Night*.

<https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/narrative-figuration-at-taittinger/4927>