

# Now Figuration @ Portrait Society

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Recalling the Milwaukee Art Museum's *New Figuration in America* (1983), *Now Figuration* explores the figure within the context of today's contemporary art landscape. The painting heavy show also includes echoes of MoMA's *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*. *Now Figuration* also presents many mirrors that might reflect the viewer's many selves.

Skully Gustafson's *Madame Zola & Stan* blends abstraction and figuration, engaging in semiotic and formal play. *Madame Zola & Stan* welcomes viewers to the gallery and immediately confronts them with difficulties (and pleasures)

of reading images in contemporary figuration. Just when viewers think they've figured it out, the painting breaks down and reinvents itself. Gustafson arrives at this sort of fluidity through the materiality of the paint and through his application: allowing smears, drips, and broken outlines. The composition of the piece is straightforward, allowing Gustafson to access a full range of colors and marks without losing intelligibility. In the end, Gustafson disassembles viewers expectations, making the placement of this piece on the wall outside the gallery significant and smart.

In Herman Aguirre's lush and chunky portraits, colors, textures, and smells lure and hold viewers gazes as inspection and introspection collide in an art experience. These portraits are profoundly beautiful yet evoke pulverized meat, scraped skin, and the scabs that form as the body heals. This sort of rawness, damage, and revitalization gives Aguirre's work implications beyond sensuous experience and encourages viewers to return to themselves changed.

Rafael Salas's mixed media collage-paintings appear as relics of a bygone era placed in shadow boxes for preservation. Yet, digital glitches appear, holes are cut in canvases, and figures are collaged into sparse landscapes utilizing the language of contemporary abstraction. Stretching the limits of memory, Salas's *Prairie Musicians* conjure passing shadows of what is being lost and move into the future as collective memories.

*Now Figuration* works despite its diversity. A level of abstraction stitches the work together and allows for an odd (but successful) combination of salon and traditional gallery installation. The resulting juxtapositions create conversations between individual artworks. The installation *Silhouettes* by J. Shimon is the only hiccup in the show. It feels crowded into the space and this viewer would like to experience it with more room to breathe.

Now, figuration is anchored in postmodernity along with the rest of contemporary art. Anything goes, and the particular mashup presented in *Now Figuration* informs how viewers see not only the world, but themselves, and what might be.



Skully Gustafson. *Madam Zola & Stan*. 2017. Acrylic on canvas.