

ARTFORUM

BRIAN CALVIN

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It must have been a shocker when Clement Greenberg, apparently inspired by the art of Horacio Torres, announced in the early '70s that he had gotten it wrong, that figurative painting (nudes!) was the better, truer modernism. More a rhetorical flourish than a genuine testament of reversed faith, the remark serves as a reminder that no matter how definitively it seems to disappear (or be disappeared) from the discourse at certain moments, the figure in painting refuses to go away. Perhaps because the "contemporary" cannot be second-guessed; perhaps because the conundrum of the body persists,

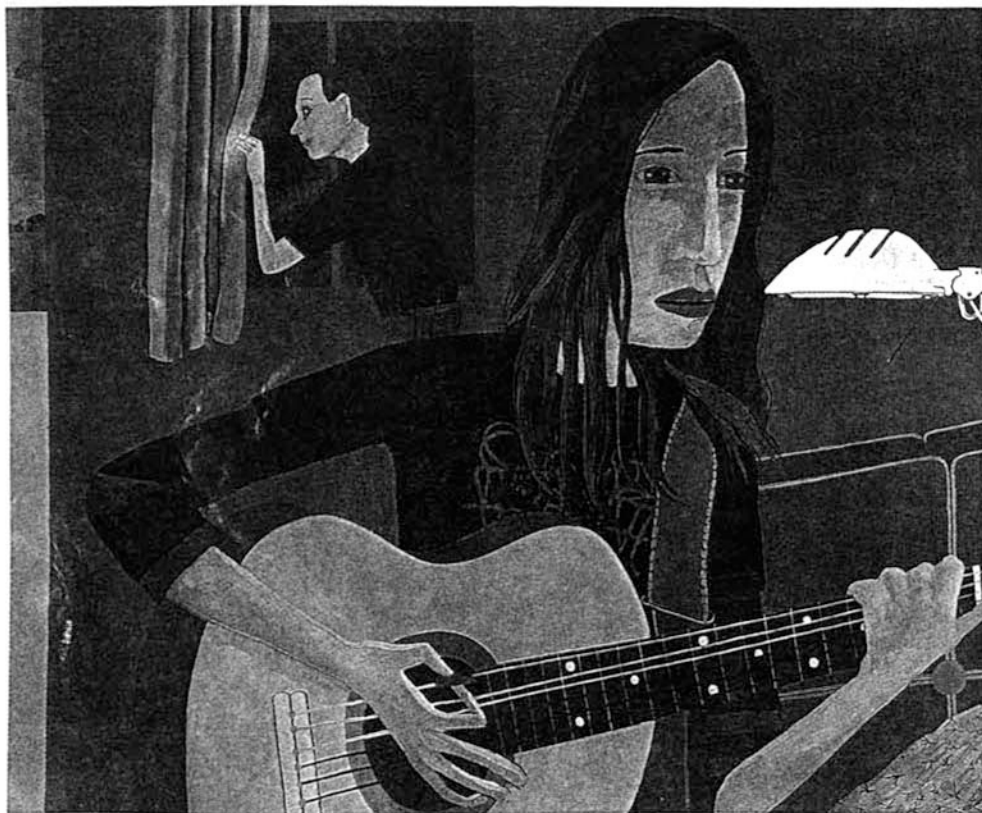
because the body will not be figured out or figured.

Of course, I don't exactly jump out of bed when I hear the words "contemporary figurative painting," because I don't really go in for caricature—which, of late, rules in almost all figurative painting, and I'm not just thinking about distortion of the figure but also pastiche. Things have gotten to be pretty wan and cynical (caricature as painting) about whatever it is painting might do. Such is the case with both the best (John Currin) and worst (Lisa Yuskavage or Kurt

Kauper, take your pick). But it doesn't have to be: Even figurative painting that looks like caricature at first might actually be deploying it as a trope, in order to achieve something at once more sincere and stranger.

Take the work of Brian Calvin. As much as it picks up the narrative of the figure in painting, this artist's weird, quietly disconcerting, mischievously witty paintings are a meditation on that tradition. He

Calvin's paintings oddly come to be about the figure as the nonfigurative, narrative as the non-narrative, canvas as not-wall, paint as not-body.



Brian Calvin, *Nowhere Boogie*, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60".

specializes in young, sometimes androgynous bohemians; skinnies in groups, smoking, drinking, waiting for who knows what; friends and/or couples at a turning point. They almost all have bloodshot eyes, long, lippy mouths, and wardrobes mixing the utterly chic and the acutely thrifted (to which Calvin pays Alex Katz-like attention). After earning an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1994 and cutting his aesthetic teeth playing in a band on the crucial Drag City label, Calvin returned to his native California in 1999; the moodiness and bluntness of Chicago, not to mention the simultaneous goofiness and rigor of indie rock, accompanied him to sometimes too sunny LA.

In *Courtesy of the Artist* (all works 2000), a painter in a studio (Calvin himself?) directs someone unseen on how to position a large canvas (brushy, to signify "painting") or maybe how to maneuver it out the door. The title phrase suggests the temporary loan of works that the artist can't bear to sell as well as those that haven't found a buyer, a nod to Calvin's ongoing consideration of his own participation in the art world. On the floor are more paintings (Calvin-esque facial close-ups and a landscape) ready to be shipped. With the artist in his SoCal casual Hawaiian shirt and corduroys, palms and succulents outside the studio windows, the scene is an homage to David Hockney—but as much to the dandy master's formalism and glamorous use of the color blue as to his content.

In this ongoing series, writers are invited to introduce the work of artists at the beginning of their careers.