

**The Drama of Life or the Drama of Representation:**  
 Millet, Corot, Rousseau, Delacroix, the Barbizon School and the  
 Influence on Contemporary Art

The French painter **Jean-François Millet** (1814-1875) was one of the founders of the Barbizon school and a noted Realist. Best known for his emotional portrayals of farm workers in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century France, Millet rejected themes of urbanization and industrialization in favor of depicting the harsh rural reality of peasants and farmers, and in so doing created iconic images of aesthetic and political importance that still resonate today (*The Angelus*, *The Gleaners*, *Man with a Hoe*). Drawing was of the utmost importance to Millet who worked both from the model and the landscape, creating both study sheets for paintings as well as finished drawings that were works of art in their own right. Recent exhibitions, such as *Millet and Modern Art from Van Gogh to Dali* at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam and the St. Louis Museum of Art (2020) have begun to explore the Millet, and other 19<sup>th</sup> century French artists' impact on many generations of artists from Van Gogh to Albert Oehlen.



**Left:** Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners*, © Musée d'Orsay **Right:** *Man with Hoe*, Getty Center, Los Angeles

This exhibition's dual focus on Figure and Landscape offers a possibility to look at how these themes were reconfigured in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and to examine the effects today. Millet's compassionate, yet sober approach to the depiction of the human figure echoes in contemporary artists' approach to figuration. At the same time, the radical concept of a newly liberated depiction of nature as practiced by the Barbizon School of artists, has clearly set the tone for the ecological vision of 21<sup>st</sup> century artists. The implicit social narrative of these landscapes radicalized an anti-academic approach to this genre and relinquished it from any classical or romantic traditions. Furthermore, thus reconfigured representations of nature constituted a proto-ecological world-view. This intentional depiction of Nature devoid of human control has a strong reverberation in contemporary approaches to landscape. The newly constructed Realist immediacy of the Barbizon school propelled the depiction

of nature beyond its illustration. These immediate, often calligraphic landscape drawings propelled modernist explorations in late 19<sup>th</sup>- early 20<sup>th</sup> century art beyond the representation of the visible world and toward abstraction. But we are reminded that this Realist vision (shared by Corot, Millet and Rousseau) held the core of the ecological worldview: to implicitly claim human being's dependence on nature, not the other way around.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary figurative drawing has reached beyond the historical practice of drawing from life to capture the drama of representation. Many artists are incorporating drawings in larger expanded media works, such as video and installation. Since the advent of the modernist period, contemporary drawing has remained a powerful medium that is not only limited to pencil or ink on paper, but includes collage techniques as well. This selection of contemporary drawings shares the spare means to reach for the directness achieved in Realism. The 19<sup>th</sup> century artists present here use an objective, yet compassionate observation of life that has little to do with superficial verisimilitude. Rather than seeking to represent the drama of life, realism is focused on the drama of representation itself.



Albert Oehlen, Untitled, 2004, Cut-and-pasted printed paper on printed paper, 6 x 7 3/4 inches, © Albert Oehlen, Courtesy David Nolan Gallery

<sup>1</sup> This is especially relevant in our era of imminent environmental collapse. For the discussion of the roots of ecological thought and vision see: Gregg M. Thomas, *Art and Ecology in the Nineteenth-Century France: The Landscapes of Theodore Rousseau*

The immediacy of Millet's depictions of both the figure and the landscape speaks for itself. Exhibiting these 19<sup>th</sup> century works side by side with contemporary artists' depictions allows a dialogue through which we can chart contemporary art history's treatment of the politics of humanism, post-humanism and environmentalism. Generally understood in Art History as a realist painter of peasants, Millet's reputation faded in the narratives of modernist developments in the 1900s. His connection with the political vision of the 19<sup>th</sup> century artists, such as Delacroix and Courbet, was posthumously defanged. After his death, his iconic painting *The Angelus* was sold at auction in 1889 for the highest price that had ever been paid for a "modern" painting.<sup>2</sup> But subsequently, the market treated his paintings as conservative, somewhat sentimental pastoral depictions of rural life.

His rural worldview was decidedly anti-sentimental and in fact, his depictions can be seen as modern counterpoints to Edgar Manet's representations of urban life.<sup>3</sup> His treatment of figures of laborers emphasized his resolute and uncompromising directness and compassion. His late phase landscape imagery showed his admiration of Nature and a radical formal reconfiguration of space. His instinctive disruption of Western traditions allowed the foreground to stand alone, in minimal compositions.<sup>4</sup> The plains around Barbizon did not contain any "point of interests," except the surface of the land itself. Millet was satisfied when contemporary critics saw his painting as of "earth". It meant that he was allowing the open expanses of the earth to be taken as the foreground of his compositions. His fascination with the open plains around Barbizon felt liberating: "every glimpse of the horizon, however narrow, should be felt to be a segment of the great circle that bounds our vision."<sup>5</sup>

This exhibition encompasses works representing figures and landscape that follow this great circle that bounds our vision, from the 19<sup>th</sup> through the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

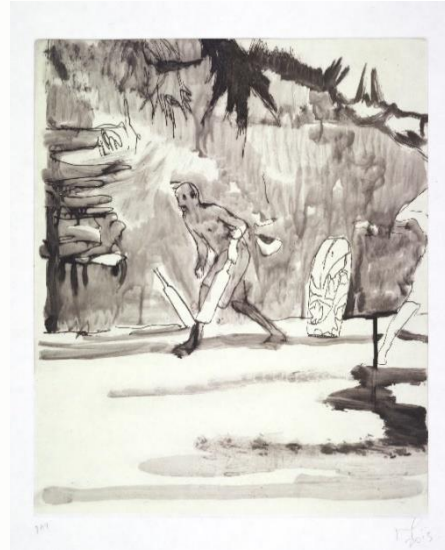
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<sup>2</sup> Simon Kelly, "Introduction," *Millet and the Modern Art from Van Gogh to Dali*, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Van Gogh wrote to Theo how Millet, not Manet is for him the essential modern painter, "who opened the horizon to many". Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Kelly, "'The Artistic Fauve': Millet as Modern Artist" in *Millet and Modern Art*, Op.cit., p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> The quote: Ibid, P. 57.



**Peter Doig's** etching with aquatint and silkscreen *Beach (Cricket)*, 2013, is one of his idiosyncratic serene, yet dynamic compositions that feature kaleidoscope landscapes punctuated by enigmatic figures. Doig frequently draws inspiration from his own memories; the blurred, ethereal quality of his canvases reflects the vagaries of time and recollection. He balances the sense of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century painting with his acute relationship with tradition and most particularly Romanticism. His solitary figures evoke German Romantic painters of the 19th Century, such as Caspar David Friedrich, and in this way his famous painting *Figure in a Mountain Landscape* captures the sense of the artist's relationship with not only the landscape but also offers an oneiric atmosphere of man's place in a vast universe. Doig's style- as many critics noted- allows for a departure from reality. It is said that his style has introduced an existential dimension, prompting the viewer to ask questions about the picture itself, the world it represents, and our own place within our own surroundings. Capturing both the figures and the painted (mediated) landscape, *Sea Lots*, 2013, achieves exactly this effect of estrangement.



**Top Left:** Peter Doig, *Sea Lots*, 2013, Etching with aquatint, chine colle, 14 1/4 x 18 inches, Image courtesy of the artist and Two Palms, NY **Top Right:** Peter Doig, *Beach (Cricket)*, 2013, Etching with aquatint and silkscreen, 22 x 18 1/2 inches, Image courtesy of the artist and Two Palms

**Bottom Left:** Jean-Francois Millet, *The Basket Maker*, c. 1845–50, Black conte crayon, charcoal, and wash on paper, 6 5/16 x 6 5/16 inches

**George Baselitz**'s prints from the 1960s are marked by growth and discovery for the artist. It was during this period that Baselitz first traveled to Italy and was introduced to Mannerist prints and techniques. Spawning a profound fascination with this style, the experience heavily influenced his then burgeoning career as a printmaker – a part of his practice that is regarded as of equal significance with his celebrated paintings. Baselitz's woodcut on paper, *Der Neue Typ (The New Type)*, 1966 speaks of this new figurative style. "Hero" or "New Type" imagery of singular male figure is depicted in heroic stances rendered with dramatic contours and wild gestural lines, while their valor is subverted by their weary expressions and tattered clothing. These subjects challenge common perceptions of masculinity, and reference Baselitz's childhood experience of violence and destruction during the war and post-war era in Germany.



**Left:** Jean-Francois Millet, *Le Depart pour Les Champs*, 1863, Black chalk with touches of white chalk on paper 17 ¼ x 11 ¾ inches **Right:** Georg Baselitz, *Der Neue Typ (The New Type)*, 1966, Woodcut on paper, 24 1/8 x 17 inches, © Georg Baselitz 2022, courtesy Luhring Augustine



**Left:** Jean-Francois Millet, *A Miller Loading a Sack of Flour on to his Horse*, Black conte crayon and black chalk on paper, 8 7/8 x 6 1/2 inches **Right:** David Scher, *My Country is Where I Stand It Up (detail)*, 1998, Ink and watercolor on handmade linen paper, 23.5 x 17.75 inches, courtesy of the artist and Pierogi Gallery

**David Scher's** drawings of laborers are closely related to the immediacy of 19<sup>th</sup> century realism. Scher's figures are often isolated within their environment where their actions become the focus—whether climbing a ladder, hammering a nail, drilling a hole, or simply sitting at rest. The artist elevates those who work with their hands, drawing parallels between the artist and blue-collar worker; he suggests that the skill of a manual laborer is no less worth celebrating than that of an artist. According to the artist, *My Country is Where I Stand It Up* (1998), ink and watercolor on handmade linen paper, depicts workers, citizens who are seen erecting structures, moving materials, organizing nature. Scher's *Boat with Parasol*, pencil and watercolor, 2021 speaks a visual language of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the theme is ambiguous. The artist poses a set of questions: “Why a boat? because one can paint water and skies and a thing with people in it. Is this a real scene? Is it a stage set? Are they on their way to our present from our (art historical) past? How does this drawing succeed and how does it disappoint? Who are they? Why do they not have oars, a sail, a motor? Is the boat riding too high in the water? Are they on holiday? Is this a disappointing romance of migrants at sea? Is one of them a migrant? Are none of them? Are they just drawings?”



**Left:** Cecily Brown, Color Etching with Brick Wall, 2003, Seven-color etching with aquatint, 24 x 28 inches, Image courtesy of the artist and Two Palms, NY **Right:** Jean-Francois Millet, Cottage in Vichy, c. 1866–68, Pen and ink on paper with pencil, 6 1/8 x 7 15/16 inches

**Cecily Brown**'s intersecting of figuration and abstraction has boldly reconfigured landscape genre in the recent era of post-genre paintings. She explains she does not set out to paint a particular genre:

“I didn’t know they were going to be landscapes; it came very gradually; it crept up... The others started getting quite worked and it started looking really mannered, having worked figures on a bare ground. One day, getting frustrated, I just put in a blue cloud, almost as a joke, and it suddenly worked. It pushed and pulled it in all the right directions, so I thought, okay, put some skies in. You can almost tell what order they were done in from the amount of sky there is.”

Her *Color Etching with Brick Wall*, (2003), etching with aquatint, has embodied this approach – allowing the composition to merge un-doing of landscape while the brick wall is rendered realistically.



**Left:** Albert Oehlen, *Untitled*, 2010, Pencil, ink, and paper collage on paper, 11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches  
© Albert Oehlen, Courtesy David Nolan Gallery

**Right:** Jean-Francois Millet, *Chemin montant aux environs de Vichy, Auvergne*, c. 1866-68, Pen and ink on paper  
5 1/8 x 8 1/4 inches

**Albert Oehlen's** mature 'post-non-objective' style, speaks about the possibilities of painting. The rigorous gestures rest upon Oehlen's rich knowledge of painters from Vermeer to de Kooning and beyond. It was said that his work reveals that under the fervent brushstrokes and abstract markings, traces of an inverted figure are glimpsed and immediately call to mind the iconic paintings of Georg Baselitz. The use of an upside-down figure as a strategy to straddle realism and abstraction is intensified by Oehlen's brushstroke, as he directly engages both abstraction and representation to create tension in his work. Oehlen's painting is indebted to expressive gesture and painterly attributes that reference powerful historic works of art in an original way. Critic and Curator Hamza Walker has described Oehlen's canvases as “represent(ing) a chorus of contradictory gestures; figuration is set against abstraction, form against anti-form, the rhythm of pattern versus a meandering stroke, and a muddy mix of colors juxtaposed against vibrant pigment straight from the tube.” *Untitled*, 2010, his pencil, ink, and paper collage on paper, along with *Untitled*, 2004, cut-and-pasted printed paper on printed paper are autonomous in so far as they have managed to eliminate through contradiction an allegiance to any particular style, while quoting both realism and expressionism.

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The exhibition is purposefully open-ended, as there are many figures in landscapes that echo Millet’s approach today. For example, in **William Kentridge’s** expressive figures, who are rooted in socio-political conditions in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. His complex narrative animations are created by photographing the changes that result from his gradually making charcoal marks and erasures to a single drawing. **Kara Walker’s** figures directly evoke violence inflicted on African-Americans by white supremacists, who were rising in number following the end of



the American Civil War and the emancipation of enslaved peoples in the late 19th Century. **Paula Rego**, a contemporary Portuguese-born figurative artist, creates paintings that merge magical with gritty realism and brings into focus feminist take on realist legacies. And the story about the influence can be continued outside of the Western context. Chinese artists, such as **Liu Wei** and **Xu Bing** both explained how close they are to the lessons of the Barbizon school, as this legacy has been part of the academic training of all Chinese painters. Liu Wei's work is a critique of ersatz Chinese reproductions of Western culture, a new world where the traditional achievements of the West are reasserted as standards to be copied without question. Liu Wei's grasp of technique and acute awareness of color and composition is evident in his lush landscapes, in which flora and fauna often escape the confines of the canvas and spill out onto the hand carved frames.

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#### **Acknowledgements:**

For her essay and for curating this series of exhibitions for the gallery, Jovana Stokic PhD; for photography William Massey; and Christa Savino, Gallery Director.

For their help in securing loans to the exhibition: David Nolan Gallery, Sean Kelly Gallery, Luhring Augustine; Two Palms; David Scher; Pierogi Gallery and other private collectors.