

## Works on Paper 1817-2021:

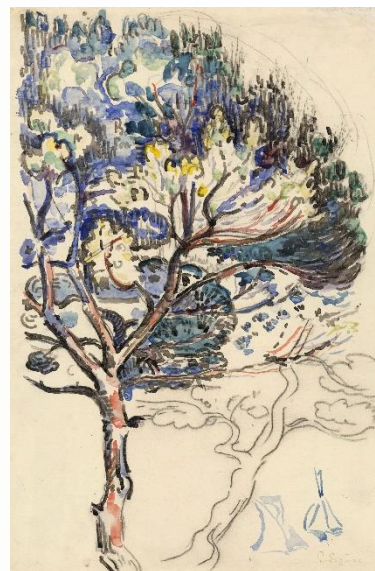
### The Realist Impulse

*“For the artist drawing is discovery. ... It is the actual act of drawing that forces the artist to look at the object in front of him, to dissect it in his mind’s eye and put it together again; or, if he is drawing from memory, that forces him to dredge his own mind, to discover the content of his own store of past observations.”*

John Berger (British art critic, painter, poet), 1953

Contemporary artists have continued the centuries-old impulse for Realism, as manifested by their close observation (“from” and “after” nature) of the natural world. This exhibition of selected artwork on paper posits a new definition of such Realism, realism that goes beyond the literal and seeks to go beyond the visible, illustrating humanity’s constant urge to measure its place in the world of figures and landscapes. Our choice of artists encompasses a range of contemporaries who explore the traditional subject matter that endures in modern and postmodern reconfigurations-- such as the nude, the portrait, and the landscape. These works create new connections with the exquisite examples of 19<sup>th</sup>/ 20<sup>th</sup> century drawings that show how artists of the past were also exploring beyond the visible while depicting the same themes.

Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, artists had a more literal relationship with what they saw, which is evident in the variety of ways they re-envisioned it in their artwork. Paintings by Corot, Delacroix, Bonnard and Cézanne were finished representations of reality in one form or the other, varying in the degree of finish, but based on images from life. It was primarily in the works of art on paper that such artists allowed themselves to veer to the abstract: by showing partial views of what they were looking at (**Signac**); by flattening out the picture plane (**Corot**); or by placing separate studies on a sheet of paper in a way that makes it more emotionally powerful (**Delacroix**). **Rodin**, for example, in his late drawings would keep his eyes only on a moving model and not even look at the sheet of paper, in an effort to draw more freely. However, in all of these cases, it is important to recognize these drawings as finished works in and of themselves, and to understand how this non-literal approach reveals the emotional reality of the moment in which each was made. And while each work began as an act of direct observation, and is a complete work of art in and of itself, some were also used as records of memory, inspiring larger more defined works in other media.





**Prior Page:**

Paul Signac, French, 1863-1935  
*Le Pin, Study for Anitbes, La Salis*, c. 1916  
 Watercolor and charcoal on paper  
 16 x 11 inches



**This Page, Left:**

J-B-C Corot, French, 1796-1875  
*Vieillard passant dans un vallon boisé*, 1873  
 Charcoal on paper  
 18 7/8 x 12 3/16 inches

**This Page, Right:**

August Rodin, French, 1840-1917  
*Study of a Standing Woman, Partially Nude, seen from the front*, c. 1896  
 Graphite, pen and ink, brush and gouache on wove paper  
 7 x 4 1/2 inches

**Realist impulses vs. Realist style**

By definition, realism in art denotes the accurate, detailed, unembellished depiction of nature or of contemporary life. Realism in the broad sense and historically, rejects imaginative idealization in favor of the close observation of outward appearances. Art historian Linda Nochlin, in her seminal 1971 study *Realism*, established that the central aim and achievement of 19<sup>th</sup> century Realist art was “to give a truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life.”<sup>1</sup> In this light, Realist artists’ response to their social and historical reality is the key constitutive element of their approach to art. But following this reasoning, all the realistic styles of the past were not “Realist,” as they were not necessarily based on the ideal of truthfulness and objectivity in the particular context of 19<sup>th</sup>-century social, political, and cultural experience. The realist impulses, or naturalisms of the past, were related to simple verisimilitude in depicting a true-to-life style which involves the representation or depiction with the least possible distortion or interpretation.

Our premise is to start from the theoretical position that realist artists not only strived to depict reality objectively, but also found diverse ways to convey reality’s meaning. Strictly following this representational reasoning, the foundational relationship between humans and art is one of perception, not emotion. Our selection shows how the representational tasks of artists’ observations (drawing from nature) merged with acts of remembrance (drawing from memory), revealing how artists’ perception is inextricably intertwined with emotion. All of the present works share the artists’ acute concern of conveying the sense of reality that comes after the act of observation, and therefore involves the emotional potentials of working from





**Left:** Jean-Francois Millet, French, 1814-1875, *The Basket Maker*, c. 1845–50, Black conte crayon, charcoal, and wash on paper, 6 5/16 x 6 5/16 inches **Right:** Théodore Géricault, French, 1791-1824, *Four drawings: Two Reclining Male Nudes and Two Studies of Arabs*. Watercolor and ink on paper. 13 x 16 1/8 inches

memory. In spite of the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s historic realist claim of depicting what is real, there is no adherence to the authority of the visible likeness - it is always the emotional reality. Géricault, Millet and Delacroix were not Realist artists in this sense, as their art was not meticulous or emotionally impartial, but their striving for immediacy and directness in depicting the visible makes them an appropriate starting point. What connects them to contemporary artists is the shared focus on observation and the figuring out of how to persuasively show the presence of objects –both figures and in nature.

With twenty-five works on paper of landscape, nude and portrait subject matter from Géricault and Delacroix and Cézanne and Bonnard and Vuillard to Peyton and Doig, our show will examine the role of emotions and memory within the realist impulse of looking. This selection of works on paper is heterogeneous – it contains studies of both the figure and the landscape in nature. Yet what connects the disparity in these works done over two centuries is the realist impulse to convey reality beyond imitation.

**Géricault’s** fiery, daring approach in his controversial paintings, profoundly influenced nineteenth-century art and beyond. In his enormous *Raft of the Medusa*, he mixed Realism and Romanticism, raising a contemporary event--a shipwreck with few survivors--to the dignity of monumental art. To achieve accuracy, he used a model of the raft and carefully studied real cadavers. Eugène Delacroix posed for one of the figures. In the case of the écorché drawings, renderings of the body's musculature without skin, artists commonly worked from cadavers although écorché sculptures made from



Théodore Géricault, *Raft of the Medusa*, 1818-19, Musée du Louvre

materials such as wax, plaster or wood were available in addition to illustrations in anatomical treatises. Delacroix is known to have drawn from corpses. These poignant images were typical artistic exercises used to enhance the understanding of the body's structure and improve ability to depict the human form. His study of a male torso appears almost abstract with lines that are activated and alive, and stretching into forms, although they in fact describe something lifeless. Starting from these revolutionary moments of realist impulses we follow the democratization of the topics in depiction of modern subjects drawn from and in the context of everyday lives. **Millet's** sober approach to the depiction of the human figure echoes in modern and contemporary artists' approach to figuration (**Rodin, Bonnard, Vuillard, Baselitz, Semmel**). At the same time, the radical concept of a newly liberated depiction of nature and the implicit social narrative of these landscapes radicalized an anti-academic approach to the genre and relinquished it from any classical or romantic traditions. (**Rousseau, Corot, Cézanne**). Thus reconfigured, such representations of nature constituted a proto-ecological world-view; and this intentional depiction of Nature, devoid of human control, has a strong reverberation in contemporary approaches to landscape. The newly constructed Realist immediacy propelled the depiction of nature beyond its simple illustration.



**Matthew Barney**, American, b. 1967  
*Embrasure*, 2019-2021  
 Etching in black ink on hand-dyed paper with electro formed copper in high-density polyethylene frame  
 18 1/2 x 20 1/2 in.  
 Courtesy of the artist and Two Palms, NY.

**Matthew Barney's** latest body of work titled *Redoubt* is centered around a feature-length film set in Idaho's Sawtooth Mountain Range. His film extends to his sculptures and etchings in the most organic way. The film shows a wolf hunt in the mountains, continuing the artist's long-standing preoccupation with landscape as both setting and subject. *Redoubt's* narrative framework evokes the ancient Greek myth of Artemis, goddess of the hunt, and Actaeon, a hunter who trespasses on her. In Barney's interpretation, an Engraver, played by the artist himself, creates a series of plein-air drawings on copper plates as he stalks Diana and her attendants. An Electroplater, shown in a remote laboratory, subjects them to a chemical process that transforms the Engraver's drawings: each plate is immersed in an electroplating

solution, causing copper growths to form on the engraved lines. These actions, undertaken with a ritualistic focus in the film, transform the engravings into talismanic objects, connecting them to the artist’s work in drawing, sculpting, and performance.

The *Redoubt* etchings reveal the merger of the classical, cosmological, and American myths about humanity’s place in the world. The artist himself spoke about the place of landscape in his oeuvre: *“The pressure of that wall of mountains combined with the great distances between places: it was something to overcome. I think there’s a psychological dimension to the way landscape imprints people from that area. I guess formally I’m sort of interested in that.”*<sup>2</sup> Barney himself grew up in Boise, Idaho, the geographic setting of which played a role in the narrative for his large-scale *Cremaster* cycle. He explains this personal connection:

*“The locations I used for Redoubt (2019) loom large in my childhood—it’s an area in the Sawtooth Mountains in Idaho where there’s an extremeness in its geology and its climate. It’s a microclimate where it gets very cold in the winter which is to do with the extreme range of elevation in this very compressed area. There’s always been something very special about that place to me, having grown up a few hours away in Boise, in the way that it has been a tangible threshold between domesticated land and the wilderness.”*<sup>3</sup>

Barney’s life-long practice of observation of Nature points to both the interior and exterior aspect of landscape:

*“I would say that both in those 19th century paintings and in my experience of the landscape in the West, that there is an interiority to those spaces, those valleys and ravines—and not just in the literal condition of isolation, but also in terms of the psychological pressure that exists from one mountain range to the next.”*<sup>4</sup>

Conceptually, but also formally, the artist has been dependent on the pressure of interior spaces and how that effects the relationship between an object and the environment. In this context, it can be said that the particular landscape of the mountains in Idaho inspired the artist’s choice of the types of representations. The etchings in black ink on hand-dyed paper with electro formed copper draw from the narratives, processes, and imagery introduced in Barney’s film *Redoubt*, while expanding on its allegorical and cosmological themes. *Embrasure* is a title for the series of etchings that combine traditional printmaking processes with the electroplating technique developed in the film *Redoubt*. In this case, a network of copper is propagated through minute pores in the paper etchings, creating nodules that partially obscure the engraved lines. A network of copper is propagated through minute pores in the paper etchings, creating metallic nodules that partially obscure the engraved lines, evoking Barney’s fascination with the topography of Idaho. Barney’s etchings *Embrasure* draw on scenes from the film and combine traditional



printmaking processes with an electroplating technique that was developed collaboratively at Two Palms and the Barney studio over the course of several years.



**Peter Doig**, Scottish, b. 1959  
*Untitled, Zermatt #4*, 2021  
 Monotype, 19 1/8 x 12 inches  
 Courtesy of the artist and Two Palms, NY.

**Peter Doig**'s latest cycle of monotypes *Untitled (Zermatt)* of 2021 problematize the role of memory in the context of the depiction of nature in a guise of traditional landscape. His approach to depicting nature has a lot to do with his understanding of working of memory and psycho-geography. The material that accompanies this body of work explains that as an avid winter sportsman, Doig lived in Zermatt for six weeks in 2020 and for four months in 2021, working out of a studio on the mountain. With his inventive, painterly approach, the artist uses alpine imagery and traditional printmaking techniques to investigate landscape, material, and form. This series of monotypes features recurring motifs, including a cat and an airborne skier, suspended against a dramatic backdrop of snow-covered peaks. Together, this body of work pays homage to Doig's passion for skiing and connection to Zermatt, while also referencing a rich tradition of alpine painting in Western art that began in the 15th century and was carried forward by masters such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Emil Nolde, and Ferdinand Holder.<sup>5</sup>

Doig frequently draws inspiration from his memories, but the blurred, ethereal quality of his images reflect the vagaries of time and processes of recollection. He balances the sense of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century painting with his acute relationship with painterly traditions of landscape painting. 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 the world.

Having made almost one thousand prints in the course of his long career, **Georg Baselitz** stands out by his direct engagement with technical processes. He has described the resistance of copperplates, woodblocks, and linoleum blocks as creative forces in his art and has referred to prints as having "symbolic power which has nothing to do with a painting." His etching *Liberty II*, 1996 executed in drypoint on copper shows the focus on the singular quality of the line, often extended from the figure, here to form a particular framing. The lines present on top and around the figure are set in relation to it and do not function as pure decoration. The figure's specific position within this frame forms a newly found balance in the composition and directs the body's significance. This etching on paper is a compelling demonstration of Baselitz's practice of the 1990s, exemplifying the artist's experimentation with his signature upside-down figure that he had introduced in 1969. His raw scrawled inverted bodies with primal power and urgency reveal his preoccupation with the human fragility. It is said that Baselitz wanted to make his figurative images an expression of a life force essential to natural and human life but with little relation to the way either of them looks and feels. His disdain for meticulous detail carries the figures' inherent meaning via tension of their distortions. Baselitz's prints show a technical prowess of a master draftsman -- he uses techniques such as chiaroscuro, dramatic cross-hatching, vigorous lines, and deliberate areas of color to underline these tensions. It has been noted in the catalog essay in the third volume of the Baselitz catalogue raisonné of prints, "printmaking...is the technique of inversion and reversal..."<sup>6</sup> But Baselitz's frequent treatment of the female body as a trope in the tradition of figurative art reveals his experimentations of the recurring use of gesture and perspective.



**Georg Baselitz**, German, b. 1938  
*Liberty II*, 1996  
 Etching on paper, 29 1/2 x 22 1/2 in.  
 © Georg Baselitz 2022, Courtesy Luhring Augustin  
 Artwork photography © bernhardstrauss.com

The artist explained:

*“you need lines and hatching to put together what you want to represent, a body, for example. The extreme anti-naturalism that comes to bear in this was what interested me. This can be in the excessiveness, the elongation, the gnarlification, the ornamental in the sheets, but it can also be in the sensuality, that is, the allure created through engraving, meaning that you leave behind that which is tied to the subject...”<sup>7</sup>*

His female nudes are often depiction of his wife, Elke. Usually, he begins by rapidly drawing the outlines of the figure directly onto a sheet, adding networks of lines. Often a line is extended from the figure and turned into an independent pattern, making the figure seem almost accidental. But Baselitz’s figure always balances within the composition and thus retains its significance, here amplified by the title “Liberty,” which alludes to the female body as a personification of an ideal. The tension between the realm of ideals in the title and the rawness of the depicted aging female body can be interpreted as the poignant realist trait.

**Joan Semmel** moved to figuration in the 1970s out of her feminist concerns around the representation of women in the culture. Her practice traces the transformation that women’s sexuality has seen in the last century and emphasizes the possibility for female autonomy through the body. Semmel’s recent drawings continue her decades-long engagement with her own naked body as subject but from an approach of improvisational gesture. While her paintings are worked up in layers of color with diverse approaches to paint handling, the drawings place primacy on the immediacy of oil crayon on paper. With the emphasis on line, Semmel concentrates on the form of the figure, and on the broad range of shapes that it comprises. In some works, she



**Left: Elizabeth Peyton**, American, b. 1965, *Alice*, 2008, Etching on Somerset velvet paper, 14 1/4 x 11 3/4 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Two Palms, NY. **Right: Joan Semmel**, American, b. 1932, *Untitled*, 2016, Oil crayon on paper, 15 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches, Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.



employs transparency to explore the overlapping of multiple figures and marks. Her drawings reveal the underlying structures of her paintings at the same time that they constitute a separate investigation of color and line.

**Elizabeth Peyton**'s delicate small-scale portraits of celebrities, friends, and historical figures have a romantic sensibility that takes its cue from Delacroix's intimate portrayals of sitters such as Chopin and George Sand. Her contrast between overt simplicity and representational complexity exaggerates the subtle space between celebrity and personhood, and the act of looking and being looked at; many of her paintings are of people in intimate, private spaces—at home reading or in bed sleeping, for instance—and are modeled after photographs or pre-existing artworks. Peyton paintings and drawings thus become repositories of emotional memory, evocation of the past, and subjectivity.

But it is important to note that Peyton was introduced also as a forerunner of New Realists. In this deliberate conflation of the notions of stylistic Realism and Romanticism we can trace the artist's particular sensibility. The etching *Alice* (2008) carries the artist's conviction that the artwork should not be descriptive, but should evoke feelings through expressive lines that convey the figure's subjective presence. What is the most striking realist impulse of this portrait is the fact that it is based on the photograph of Alice Neel (1900 – 1984), another female American realist painter. Neel was known for her portraits depicting friends, family, lovers, poets, artists, and strangers in her idiosyncratic realist style with the expressive use of line and color, psychological acumen, and emotional intensity. Her works contradicted and challenged the traditional and objectified nude depictions of women by her male predecessors. She pursued a career as a figurative painter during a period when abstraction was favored, and she did not begin to gain critical praise for her work until the 1960s. Peyton's print emphasizes the realist striving of both artists by her unique graphic sensitivity that transforms her subject, imbuing the image with a sense of beauty that transcends the everyday.

Jovana Stokic. PhD

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere gratitude to my colleagues who have loaned to this exhibition:  
Two Palms Gallery, New York; Luhring Augustine; Alexander Gray Gallery; James  
Cohan Gallery.

In the gallery, thanks to Christa Savino and Amelia Gorman; To Jovana Stokic,  
curator for her thoughtful selection.

Jill Newhouse

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Nochlin, *Realism*, London: Pelican Books, 1971, p.?

<sup>2</sup> Quoted at: <https://www.guggenheim.org/teaching-materials/matthew-barney-the-cremaster-cycle/>

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Barney, Int. by Neville Wakefield, *Caleidoscope* (<https://www.kaleidoscope.media/article/matthew-barney>)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See Two Palms website (<https://www.twopalms.us/series/zermatt-monotypes#tab:thumbnails>)

<sup>6</sup> Georg Baselitz, *Werkverzeichnis der Druckgraphik 1983–1989*, ed. Rainer Michael Mason and Detlev Gretenkort, Snoeck Publishing Company, Cologne, 2019, p. 362.

<sup>7</sup> Georg Baselitz, *Vier Wände*, ed. Ulrich Weisner, Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Bielefeld, 1985, p. 15.