

BACON BALL BROWN BURGERT CABELLUT CLOSE CURRIN DE KOONING

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FREUD GIACOMETTI HOCKNEY KAMI KAPOOR LICHTENSTEIN MUECK

PANG SCHNABEL WALL WILEY

The Figure in Process

de Kooning to Kapoor, 1955–2015

PIVOT ART + CULTURE

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Introduction

Pivot Art + Culture believes in the primacy of lived experience in the appreciation of art and the understanding of human creativity. Following the lead of Paul G. Allen, our founder, we believe artists, and the work artists create, play a transformative role in helping us understand the world and our place within that world—physical, historical, social, and economic—empowering us all to effect change. We have a deep passion for art and for the creativity that makes art, and want to share it with our audience.

We are thrilled to present *The Figure in Process*, and for our curator to be a scholar of the stature of David Anfam. In this exhibition you will have the opportunity to experience some of the greatest master works of figurative art from the last six decades, and we hope this encounter will lead you to view the human figure, its representation, and yourself in new and unexpected ways.

BENEDICT HEYWOOD
GALLERY DIRECTOR, PIVOT ART + CULTURE

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The Figure in Process

DAVID ANFAM

This project explores how artists have addressed the human figure and its place in the world across the broadest spectrum—from verisimilitude to the cusp of abstraction, from the grotesque to the ideal, and from two into three dimensions. Its scope begins in 1955 and spans six decades, extending from the United States to Europe and Southeast Asia. The chosen individuals hail from compass points as disparate as Washington State, Tehran, Dublin, Bombay, New York City, Melbourne, and Barcelona. Still, the subject’s magnitude means that any claims to comprehensiveness would be absurd. Instead the aim is to offer a microcosm, a focused window of possibilities suggesting larger vistas withal. How better to broach this perspective than with a painting executed precisely a decade beforehand? That the work reflects a moment when world history stood at zero heightens its relevance.

Philip Guston’s *If This Be Not I* (fig. 1) is a nocturnal allegory of the human condition in 1945. The title refers to a nursery rhyme about an old woman who forgets who she is, while the masked and blindfolded children, plus the striped fabrics, point to the Holocaust. It was a survivor of the death camps, the Italian chemist Primo Levi, who famously reiterated that the Nazis strove to erase the identity of their victims. No wonder the title of Primo Levi’s book *If This Be a Man* (1947) echoes, by telling coincidence, Guston’s. *If This Be Not I* also signaled how human identity reduced to its uttermost limits lay at the crux of abstract expressionism. Understood thus, the many-sided movement



Figure 1

Philip Guston
If This Be Not I, 1945
 Oil on canvas
 42¹/₄ × 55¹/₄ inches

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum,
 Washington University in St. Louis.
 University purchase, Kende Sale
 Fund, 1945.

becomes a touchstone for the art that followed it—whether in the same spirit, in opposition, or as a complex mix of both. To survey the vast panoply of figurative art created during the past half century or so is to witness both abstract expressionism’s legacy as well as its antitheses.

Take Barnett Newman’s avowal that “the self, terrible and constant” constituted his subject matter. This voiced a similar existentialism to Guston’s. But Newman translated his beliefs into a radically non-objective language of stark verticals that stand amid engulfing color fields. Notwithstanding, it was in Alberto Giacometti’s attenuated sculptural figures that Newman recognized his own preoccupations. Around the late 1940s Giacometti and Newman tackled the same ideas, albeit from opposing standpoints. Giacometti’s genius was not to distill our being in the world into signs, as did Newman, but instead to seek it in process—as many subsequent artists in this exhibition would—suspended between presence and the void, matter and dissolution (p. 19). “Process”—grasped in its manifold senses as involving flux, metamorphosis, materials, the play of meanings, and so forth—offers

a text for the otherwise impossibly multifarious scenarios comprising figuration after abstract expressionism.

Willem de Kooning epitomized abstract expressionism. In his great abstractions of the late 1940s, de Kooning had shattered human anatomy into a kaleidoscopic painterly labyrinth. Then, in 1950, his indomitable *Women* began to reassert the centrality of the human presence and its driving force, eros. De Kooning’s pivotal *Woman as Landscape* (p. 17) marked the stage at which the angst-filled figure shed its urban associations to meld into nature—the metamorphosis captured by the mutability of paint that serves simultaneously to represent and erase, as the female shifts in and out of focus. De Kooning thereby announced a central preoccupation for certain ensuing artists and one that informs this survey. In sum, a tug of war between the urge to seize appearances versus the abstract mark making inherent in the medium itself. This polarization assumes countless forms.

At one end of the scale, artists such as Giacometti, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, and Lita Cabellut uphold a humanism that pits representation against the annihilation of the self as threatened by, say, World War II. Even as Giacometti and Bacon’s tortured protagonists reflected this anxiety, they also embodied a confidence in the materiality of clay and oil paint to fix in space or on canvas the residues of observation (p. 23). Going further, no matter to what degree Freud reveled in rich impasto, it ultimately buttressed the humanness of his subjects. *Large Interior W11 (after Watteau)* transports the titular French old master to what we might call a kitchen sink setting (p. 24). Yet in so doing Freud stressed not chill objectivity but the tender immediacy of his vision. A similar sentiment informs Cabellut’s people. The craquelure of her exquisite surfaces is meant (in the artist’s words) to be “symbolic

for the skin that shows the real condition of a person” (p. 45). The pathos of Cabellut’s paintings rests upon their mix of forthrightness and masquerade. It is as if the figure, repressed by modernist puritanism, must perforce return precariously.

The notion of the self as imperiled had one root cause in the cataclysmic twentieth century. Since then, other factors have challenged our subjectivity. Modern mechanical mass reproduction—photography, cinema, and television—long ago engineered a seemingly infinite continuum of images that redefines the boundaries between the real and the illusory. More recently, cyberspace and cognate breakthroughs—from computers and smart phones to digitization, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, emails, tweets, instagrams, and so forth—have revolutionized attitudes to space and time. The boundaries of where selfhood begins and ends have become porous. The same applies to our temporal awareness: past, present, and future now commingle at our fingertips. The ripple effects have permeated art.

Firstly, certain painters, together straddling older and young generations, have continued in the aforementioned humanist tradition of Giacometti, Bacon, and Freud. Among the former is the ninety-five-year-old Wayne Thiebaud. Much as Thiebaud revels in his quasi-abstract handling of juicy oil paint, his women confront us with the statuesque calm of ancient Greek *kouroi* (p. 21). They seem like Technicolor glimpses of the ideal clad in everyday clothes. Among a far younger generation, Cecily Brown’s celebrations of eroticism echo de Kooning and thence such old masters as Rubens and Veronese (p. 29), not to mention her thought-provoking titles (*Tender is the Night* alludes to John Keats via Scott Fitzgerald). Despite this august lineage, deliberate regression informs Brown’s tableaux, as though libido had the upper hand,

transforming erstwhile legible scenes into a polymorphous perversity, its near-formlessness at once joyous and edgy. Comparable energies inform Julian Schnabel’s paintings on shattered crockery and velvet (p. 27). They combine alluring tactility, vivid colorism, and symbolic and personal clues with an air of barbarism. As Schnabel remarked, he wished to make “something that was exploding” as well as “something that was cohesive.” Such conflict thrusts representation into a medley of urgent and fractured traces.

By contrast, John Currin and Kehinde Wiley restore some stability to the body physical. Emulating old masters such as Lucas Cranach, the former crafts sugar-sweet yet sly paeans to delight and beauty (p. 33). This historicism—a leitmotif in contemporary figuration suggesting the ubiquity of art’s histories in an omniscient present—recurs in Wiley’s takes on black identity. Surrounded and even entwined by decorative backgrounds that are their conceptual bling, Wiley gives his youths venerable poses. For instance, *Young Man Holding a Skull* adverts to Frans Hals’s treatment of the same theme (p. 46), a swagger portrait for the twenty-first century. Light years distant in mood although equally concerned with other types of identity, in this case often Near Eastern, hover Y. Z. Kami’s sitters who inhabit apparently seraphic, if often elegiac, realms. Frontal and hazy, they resemble dream-like memories filtered through the lens of photography (p. 40). Kami’s is the tip of a proverbial iceberg linking photography and the figure in recent years.

Paradoxically, the impact of photography or photographic exactitude on art led towards abstractness or conceptualism. Witness Chuck Close’s photo-realist portraits. Despite their visual acuity, they highlight not depiction per se but, rather, the abstract strategies of making schemata

that translate optical data from three into two dimensions (p. 39). Also, their scale is anti-realistic. For David Hockney, the formal double portrait—a genre established in the Renaissance—could be updated to an impassivity that mimics the photographic medium (p. 20). In the same breath, Hockney’s canny treatment of the foreground glass-topped table—akin to the skull in Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* almost five centuries earlier—belies the effect of unalloyed realism. Paradoxically, this also applies to those who have pursued photography. Jeff Wall spearheads this mode. Loaded with detail, Wall orchestrated his homage to the costume historian Ivan Sayers so that it evinces an intricacy and premeditation worthy of any pre-modern history painting (p. 41). As such, his figures fuse documentation and theater.

From another angle, even the photographic look of Mark Tansey’s monochromes veils complicated metaphysical questions about how we know phenomena and tell substance from shadow. In a twist upon convention, Tansey fashions his images by subtracting, not accumulating, paint layers, which accentuates their mirage-like feel. Alternatively, Roy Lichtenstein’s first pop paintings exploited the mass media, such as comic books. Although stylistically distant from photo-realism, Lichtenstein’s post-pop pictorial collages, such as *Interior with Swimming Pool Painting*, nevertheless addressed similar matters (p. 28). What is depiction, how does it intersect with abstraction, and by what means does art convey its messages? In an “interior” featuring a reflective pool constructed from the building blocks of draftsmanship presented as if through a magnifying glass—hatchings, outlines, pale color planes—a Lichtenstein-like sculpture on a table in turn recalls Picasso’s *Weeping Women* pictures of the 1930s. We are in a perceptual and intellectual hall of mirrors. In a comparable vein underlying a

wholly different exterior, the hyperrealist sculptor Ron Mueck added a mirror to his illusionistic crouching boy (p. 30). Combined with the fact that the child is smaller than he should be, Mueck seems to subtly interrogate life and limb itself. This frisson heralds yet another, final mode of contemporary figuration. It replaces beauty, quietude, and the ideal with their opposites.

A fascination with the old masterly past—as noted in Freud, Brown, Wiley, and their ilk—can result in either a new humanism or its antithesis, which might be termed the post-human grotesque. Glenn Brown mines this fertile area. Metamorphosis is key to Brown’s procedures, which yield works of mind-boggling intertextuality. In *They Threw Us All in a Pit and Built a Monument on Top (part I and part 2)*, the leftward panel derives from a Jean-Honoré Fragonard painting of Venus, while Brown appropriated the second image from a George Baselitz painting of a thumb (p. 37). The title comes from a rock song, the panels are different in size, and the technique manages to produce a thin painting of what appears to be thick paint. Contradiction and simulation reign, as does process. What *The Matrix* (1999) did in film, Brown’s shape-shifting achieves for painting. The once-stable human agent dissolves into a myriad baffling guises. A short distance perhaps separates Brown’s mazes from Barry X Ball’s sculptures (p. 42). Layering numerous historicist vestiges with the most up-to-date digital technology, Ball’s busts combine spectacular decomposition with the utmost formal sophistication to confound any single reading of their visceral virtuosity. Likewise, although Anish Kapoor appears to eschew the figure for immaculate geometry, his discs dissolve our reflections into an abyss of blood redness (p. 34). We are, as it were, back to zero.



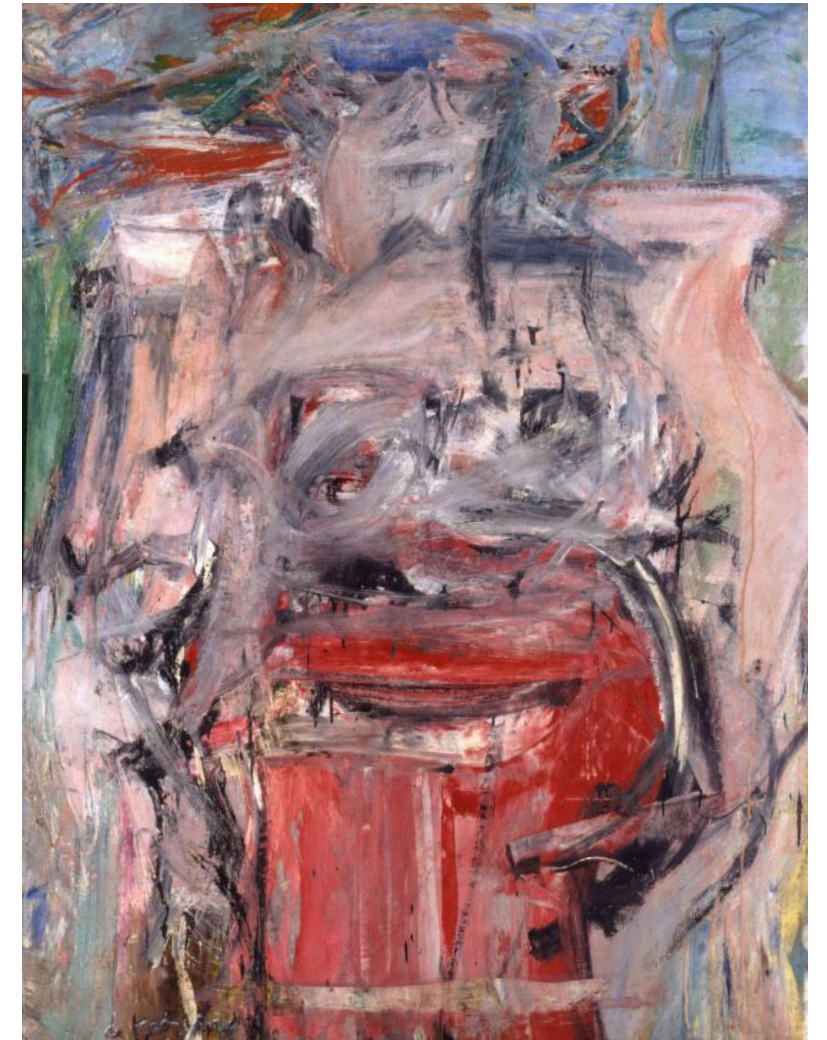
Figure 2

The Veil Nebula - Segment 3,
1994/1997

© NASA, ESA, and the Hubble
Heritage (STScI/AURA)-ESA/Hubble
Collaboration; Acknowledgment:
J. Hester (Arizona State University)

Speaking of zero, Jonas Burgert’s immense pictorial dramas bring the wheel full circle, half a century on, to the existential crisis posed by Guston’s *If This Be Not I*. Like that painting, Burgert’s presents the figure as though massed on the *theatrum mundi*, the Shakespearean theater of the (now modern) world. As Burgert observes, “We want to struggle on the stage of life, there is an ongoing process. But why are we not satisfied with who we are?” He also describes the extraordinary, morbid panorama of *Stück Hirn Blind* as a “huge mountain of trash” (p. 46). Hence, again, memories of the death camps lurk. Yet the colors of this densely populated devastation are carnival-bright and the whole looks as though it were in the lively process of forming itself—note how the painting unravels at its lower margins. Is there hope among the ruins? Ruben Pang’s art may provide an answer (p. 49). Although Pang’s figures resemble wraiths, they also bring to mind the rainbow stuff of nebulae in outer space (fig. 2). Whether dark or upbeat, abject or celestial, contemporary artists’ multiform involvement with the figure has mirrored our own protean selves.

The concept of my title references Julia Kristeva’s notion of “the subject-in-process,” while I am also indebted to Robert Jay Lifton’s book, The Protean Self.



Woman as Landscape

Willem de Kooning
1955
Oil on charcoal on linen
65½ × 49½ inches

Collection of Barney A. Ebsworth
© 2015 The Willem de Kooning
Foundation / Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York, NY



Femme de Venise III

Alberto Giacometti
1956
Bronze, edition 5 of 6
45⁷/₈ × 7 × 13¹/₂ inches

Paul G. Allen Family Collection
© 2015 Alberto Giacometti Estate /
Licensed by VAGA and ARS, NY
Image credit: Courtesy of the
Paul G. Allen Family Collection

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Henry Geldzahler and
Christopher Scott

David Hockney
1968–1969
Acrylic on canvas
84 × 120 inches

Collection of Barney A. Ebsworth
© David Hockney, Inc.
Image credit: Richard Schmidt

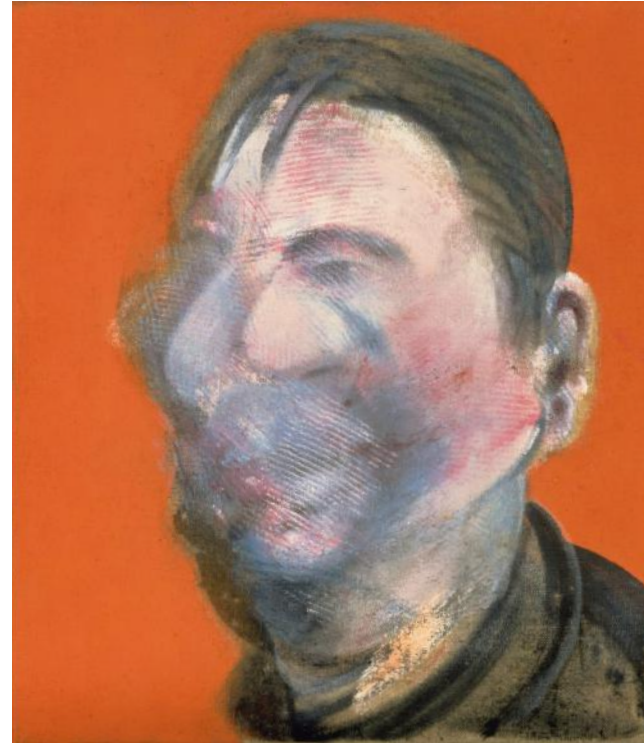
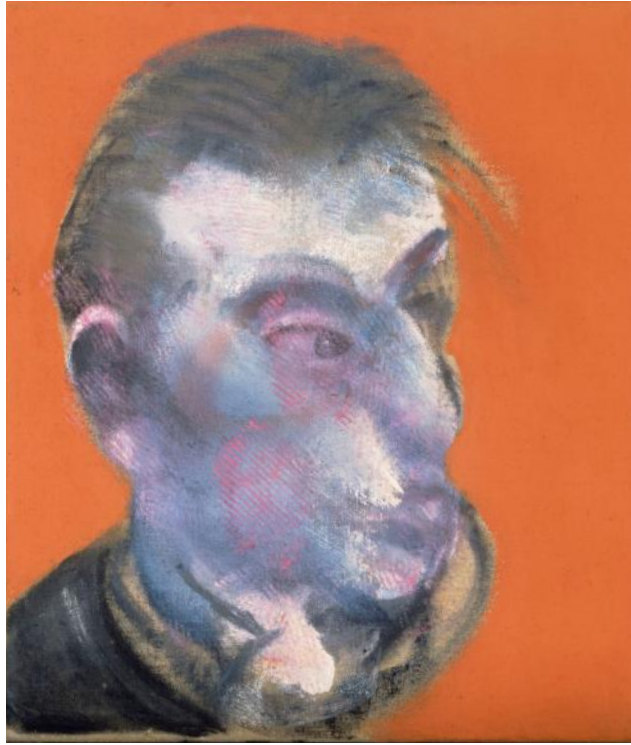
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Girl in Striped Blouse

Wayne Thiebaud
1973–1975
Oil on canvas
66 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 36 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches

Courtesy of Allan Stone Collection,
New York
© 2015 Wayne Thiebaud / Licensed
by VAGA, NY
Image credit: Allan Stone Collection



Three Studies for a
Self-Portrait

Francis Bacon
1979
Oil on canvas
14 x 12 inches each

Paul G. Allen Family Collection
©The Estate of Francis Bacon
All rights reserved / DACS,
London / ARS, NY 2015
Image credit: Courtesy of the
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Large Interior W11
(after Watteau)

Lucian Freud
1981–1983
Oil on canvas
73 × 78 inches

Paul G. Allen Family Collection
© 2015 The Lucian Freud Archive /
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London
Image credit: Courtesy of the
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Bob and Joe

Julian Schnabel

1984

Oil and modeling paste
on velvet

120 × 108 inches

The Broad Art Foundation
©2015 Julian Schnabel / Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York
Image credit: Robert McKeever



Interior with Swimming Pool
Painting

Roy Lichtenstein
1992
Oil and Magna on canvas
72 × 60 inches

Private collection
© Estate of Roy Lichtenstein
Image credit: Michele A. Burton

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Tender is the Night

Cecily Brown
1999
Oil on linen
100 × 110 inches

The Broad Art Foundation
© The Artist
Image credit: Robert McKeever

Crouching Boy in Mirror

Ron Mueck
1999–2002
Mixed media
Figure: 17 × 18 × 11 inches;
Mirror: 18 × 22 × ¼ inches

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Rachel and Butterflies

John Currin
1999
Oil on canvas
68 × 38 inches

Promised gift of the Virginia and
Bagley Wright Collection, in honor
of the 75th Anniversary of the
Seattle Art Museum
© The Artist
Image credit: Eduardo Calderon

Blood Cinema

Anish Kapoor
2000
Acrylic and steel
 $77\frac{5}{8} \times 77\frac{5}{8} \times 20\frac{1}{8}$ inches

Private Collection, Courtesy
of Marlborough Fine Art Ltd.
© 2015 Anish Kapoor / ARS, NY
Image credit: Courtesy of
Kapoor Studio

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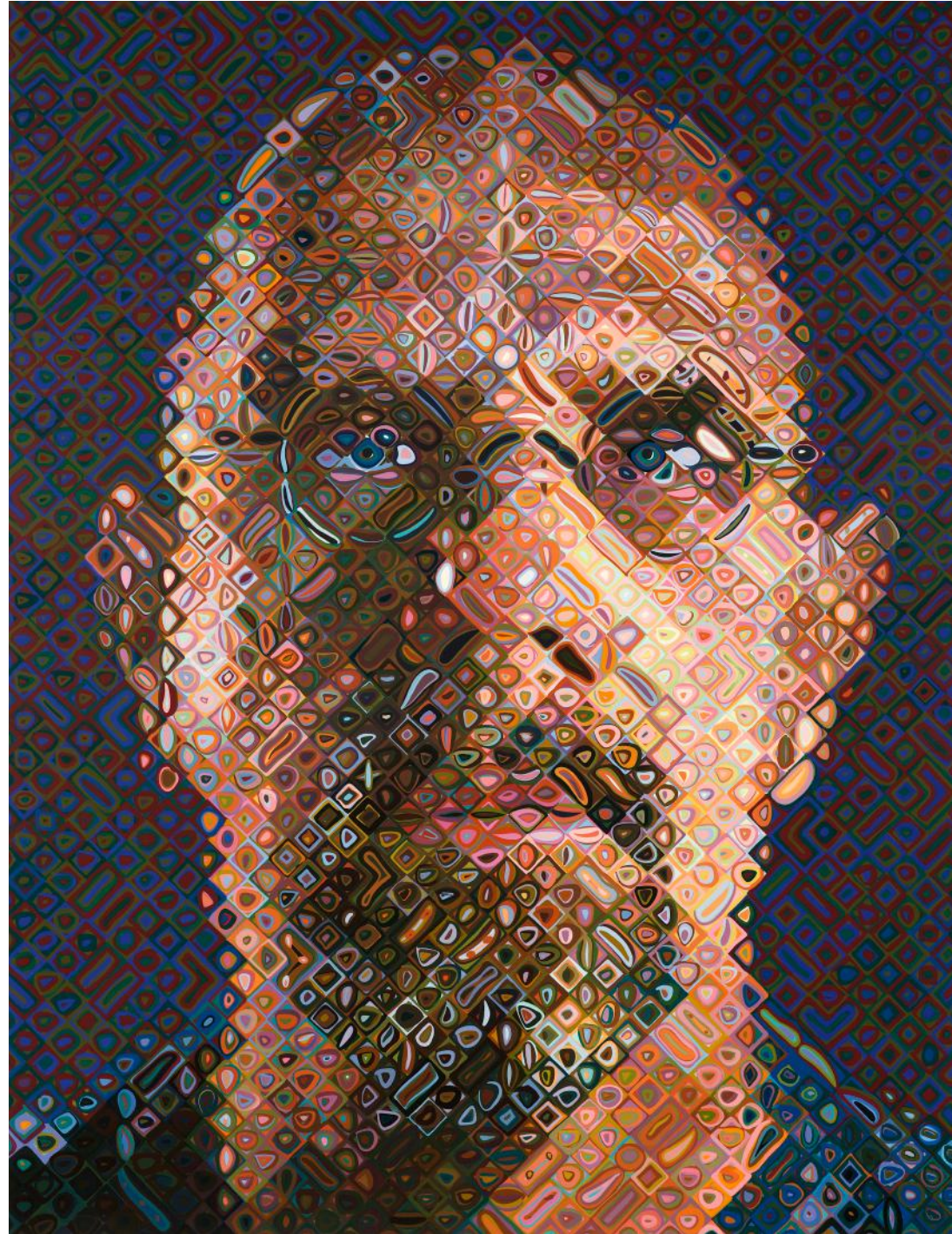
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They Threw Us All in a Pit
and Built a Monument on
Top (part 1 and part 2)

Glenn Brown
2003
Oil on panel
Left: $51\frac{1}{2} \times 34\frac{13}{20}$ inches;
Right: $60\frac{2}{5} \times 40\frac{1}{2}$ inches

Rennie Collection, Vancouver
© The Artist
Image credit: Courtesy of Glenn
Brown Studio



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Self-Portrait

Chuck Close

2007

Screenprint in 203 colors,
edition of 80

74½ × 57¾ inches

Courtesy of the Artist and
Pace Prints
© Chuck Close

Untitled (Maryam)

Y.Z. Kami
2007
Oil on canvas
116 × 66 inches

Paul G. Allen Family Collection
© The Artist
Image credit: Courtesy of the
Paul G. Allen Family Collection



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Ivan Sayers, costume historian,
lectures at the University
Women's Club, Vancouver,
7 December 2009. Virginia
Newton-Moss wears a British
ensemble c. 1910, from Sayers'
collection, 2009

Jeff Wall
2010
Chromogenic print, edition of 3
75 × 91⁹/₁₆ inches

Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery.
Purchased with funds from the Vancou-
ver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund, Jean
MacMillan Southam Art Acquisition
Endowment Fund and donations by
Phil Lind and Wesgroup Properties
© The Artist

Envy

Barry X Ball
2008–2013
Mexican onyx and
stainless steel
23 × 17¼ × 9½ inches

Courtesy of the Artist and Sperone
Westwater, New York
© 2015 Barry X Ball / ARS, New York
Image credit: Barry X Ball

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After The Show 04

Lita Cabellut

2012

Mixed media on canvas

115³/₄ × 84¹/₄ × 2³/₄ inches

Collection of the Artist

© The Artist

Image credit: Studio Tromp

Young Man Holding a Skull

Kehinde Wiley
2013
Oil on canvas
60 × 48 × 4½ inches

Josef Vascovitz and Lisa Goodman
Collection
© The Artist / Roberts & Tilton,
Culver City, California
Image credit: Robert Wedemeyer

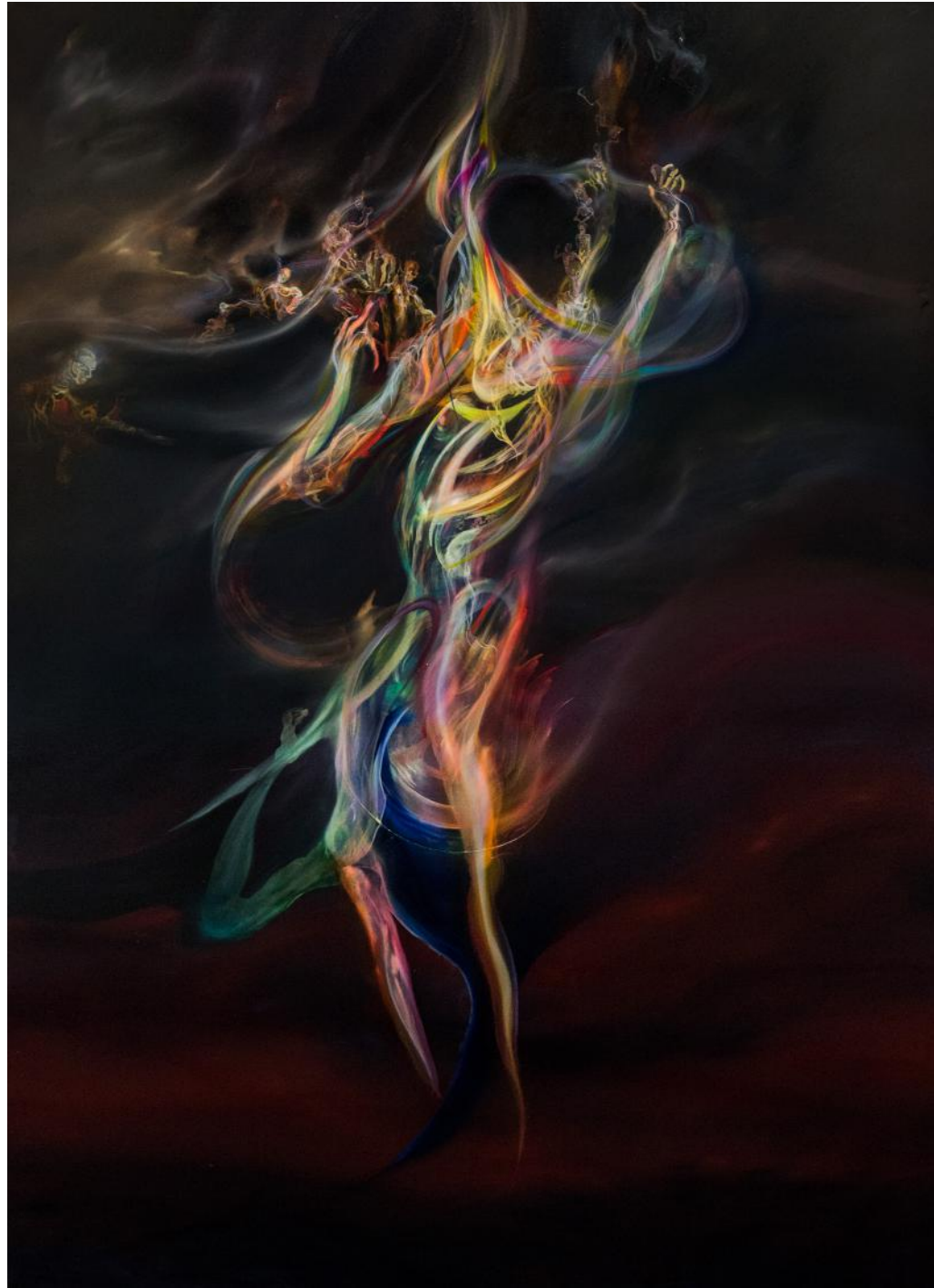
(GATEFOLD)
Stück Hirn Blind

Jonas Burgert
2014–2015
Oil on canvas
137¼ × 315 inches

Courtesy of the Artist and
Blain | Southern
© The Artist
Image credit: Lepkowski Studios



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Gradually, a Pleasure

Ruben Pang
2015
Oil, alkyd, and retouching
varnish on aluminum
composite panel
75^{5/8} x 55^{1/10} inches

Courtesy of the Artist and Chan
Hampe Galleries
© The Artist
Image credit: Gel ST

This painting was specially commis-
sioned for *The Figure in Process*.

Acknowledgments

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