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Conner Contemporary's 'Is Realism Relevant?' reviewed

By Danielle O'Steen, Published: September 30

Academic painting has some explaining to do, at least in the context of a contemporary art gallery. At [Conner Contemporary](#), it stands up to the challenge in an exhibition featuring Erik Thor Sandberg, Nathaniel Rogers and Katie Miller. Even the show's title,

"Is Realism Relevant?" seems to question the genre.

Can such painting — filled with figures, landscapes and objects depicted in fine detail, evoking Dutch and Flemish art from the 16th and 17th centuries — hold up against the barrage of new media that has flooded the art world for the past 50 years? Can such work still be relevant when abstract art has already wrestled figurative art countless times over?

The artists, Sandberg, Rogers, and Miller, do not necessarily answer all of these questions, but they provoke such conversation. And they hold up a mirror — often erotic, removed, and surreal — to the world that surrounds us.

Some pictures even leap from the walls. Sandberg mounts his paintings on curved wooden armatures that allow the images to float in space. On these sculptural bases, his paintings depict long-necked, half-naked female subjects who wrestle in different ways with the natural world, their animalistic tendencies, and a biological balance.

One trio of panoramic paintings, which create a semicircle with their wooden structures, begins with the image of a woman connected intravenously to an orchid through her ear by a string of dewy matter. The middle painting shows a blue porta-potty settled among gnarled old trees on a cliff side overlooking a river's bend, where smoke from a distant factory muddies the sky. At the far end, another starry-eyed nude woman perches on a hilltop, presiding over a panoply of birds flying in from an expansive landscape.

Insatiably detailed, Sandberg's odd scenes offer visual candy, as his figures pose languidly amid such fantastical environments. But their presence, like the porta-potty, seems wrong. Their connection to the natural world is tentative, and often sexuality explicit, as other paintings show figures acting on bizarre erotic impulses (acts involving lovers dressed as teddy bears) and exposing their nudity grotesquely.



(COPYRIGHT KATIE MILLER, COURTESY CONNER CONTEMPORARY ART) - Katie Miller, 'Young Bling Cole with a Merry Canary.'

Eroticism pervades Miller's paintings as well in her portraits of young children gussied up with rouged cheeks and spray-tans, and depicted mostly in the nude, as if plucked from some episode of "[Toddlers & Tiaras](#)" gone horribly wrong. One boy with chiseled

features and honed abs (qualities naturally impossible with one so young) even poses beside a horse that wears mascara. Situated as figures of worship and devotion, Miller's glossy, red-faced tots shine in the glow of consumer culture and adult desire.

These are troubling contemporary issues that almost take away from the paintings' crisp details and jeweled surfaces, as well as Miller's hypnotic depiction of rosy skin filled with life. In this style of portraiture, she evokes historic predecessors, such as 16th-century painter Hans Holbein the Younger, whose [portrait of Edward VI](#) as a child (on view at the National Gallery of Art) could be the model for Miller's picture of a young boy wearing large headphones, a gold pacifier, and a shirt with "bling" in the form of another pacifier.

Finding such historic threads in the work of these artists, who reside in the Baltimore and Washington area, lends credence to their relevancy. Yet it's not the style that gives these works a platform to speak from, but their thought-provoking subjects.



(Copyright Nathaniel Rogers, courtesy Conner Contemporary Art) - Nathaniel Rogers, 'The King is Dead.'

Rogers's narratives evoke a different sort of cultural anxiety, wrapped up in his fascination with the effects of virtual reality, gaming, and technological communication on the physical space that surrounds us.

In one scene a woman stands triumphant over the body of a slain life-sized Lego toy king as Lego walls crumble to reveal a house ablaze in wildfire. The woman seems to ignore the looming threat of the fire, which — real or imagined — appears as an unyielding natural force in a several of Rogers's paintings.

Another painting shows a large woman in a bathing suit leaning over to allow a smaller woman to drive a nail into her behind, while a Ferris wheel looms in the background. Meanwhile, a piece of the sky appears to be peeling away, revealing wood paneling beneath. Such illusionistic details and illogical narratives remind the viewer that these scenes are constructed and only the stuff of paint. These are just pictures after all — their subjects no more concrete than the scores of images we absorb on a daily basis, and as tentative as any virtual experience.

While the works by Sandberg, Miller, and Rogers don't herald the rebirth of painting, they evoke the tradition of realism bent on this interest in painting daily modern life, whether it be in boisterous genre paintings riddled with moralistic lessons by Dutch master Jan Steen or 19th-century Parisian street scenes painted by Edouard Manet and written about by Charles Baudelaire (who remarked in 1845 that "the true painter . . . extracts from present-day life its epic aspects").

The vulgar sexuality and peculiar subjects in these paintings may eclipse any ambitions for epic greatness, but the work insists that academic painting can still foster contemporary conversation and, when done well, can even be sublime.

Is Realism Relevant?

Erik Thor Sandberg, Nathaniel Rogers, Katie Miller exhibit through Oct. 22 at Conner Contemporary, 1358 Florida Ave. NE, Wednesday–Saturday, 10 am–5pm. 202 - 588 - 8750, www.connercontemporary.com.