

CONTEMPORARY REALISM

The Seavest Collection



Richard D. Segal and Monica M. Segal

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Cover Design: Kevin A. Welsch, Sara Blum

Design: Jerry Soga

Editors: Lindsay S. Brown, Jade Chan, Elizabeth Fuller

Index: Corine Milano

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Segal, Richard D.

Contemporary realism the Seavest collection / by Richard D. Segal and Monica M. Segal essays by Jared Pruzan introduction by Dede Young.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-933112-37-4 (hardcover alk. paper)

1. Realism in art. 2. Art, American--20th century--Catalogs. 3. Art, American--21st century--Catalogs. 4. Segal, Richard D., 1954--Art collections--Catalogs. 5. Segal, Monica M., 1956--Art collections--Catalogs. 6. Art--Private collections--United States--Catalogs. I. Segal, Monica M., 1956- II. Pruzan, Jared. III. Title.

N6512.5.R4S44 2007
709.73'074--dc22

2007000604

Distributed by Publishers Group West

ISBN 10: 1-933112-37-9

ISBN 13: 978-1-933112-37-4

First American Edition

Printed in China
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Introduction

The reflection of *the real* in images of the world around us has held a special fascination and has been one of art's most potent subjects. In the United States between the two world wars, realism dominated the scene, and only the rise of Abstract Expressionism caused an interruption before realism once again became a prevailing style in American art, finding a fresh voice in the 1960s and gaining momentum in the 1970s. It was in the aftermath of the realist revival in the 1970s that the Seavest Collection of Contemporary Realism began, and it extends to the present to include examples by a younger generation of artists whose worldview challenges past canons and who are creating art far beyond strict categorization.

Since 1980, Rick and Monica Segal have built the Seavest Collection through a process of avid searching and collecting that Rick has described as "an addiction that filled my soul with the peace that comes from understanding." This addiction—or passion or affliction, as many collectors confess—"has been informed by the belief that there exists an object out there in the wilds of the world that, when discovered, obtained, and displayed, will further the quest to build for oneself a nest that with its very presence and appearance provides us with the sense of security and belonging that comes from the knowledge that we are at home." The fact that art can bring a more grounded or expanded meaning to the experience of daily life is not inherently revelatory, but the commitment to continually update an otherwise historic collection, to question and reconsider the meaning and value of these objects in the context of culture and one's life today, and to never hit a saturation point is indeed remarkable.

Considered in terms of its particular focus, this collection becomes an extraordinary story that runs parallel to life. It reveals not only the historic arc of realism as a genre, but the activity of collecting in the marketplace and a growing and changing taste for objects that reflect both the outside world and the complex inner world of the collector. The Segals' discovery of and appreciation for the profusion of subjects and styles over the past twenty-six years of collecting have come together to form a personal document that is generously shared in this public forum.

Collecting art creates a kind of connective tissue to the world. It is a means to face the reality of global life and deepen one's relationship to it. As the Seavest Collection developed, it naturally gained depth and diversity, but its starting point was the acquisition of works defined clearly within the canon. Today, we consider these earlier works masterful, beautiful, or important historic records of the moment, but they also gain new meaning when judged in light of recent sociopolitical developments. The collection expresses an authentic respect for the richness and range of realism without being academic or a textbook case survey.

When assessed carefully, this volume gives us more than a representation of the world we live in. It also conveys the collectors' active response to the cultural shift in the United States that saw more inclusion of women and minority artists. Recent additions to the collection include female nudes portrayed by female artists, which had previously been defined and portrayed by men. The recent acquisition of work by Asian-American artists further attests to the contemporizing of a previously narrowly defined "American" art and an expansion of the notion of "belonging" that stimulated the forming of the collection. Younger generations of artists whose work significantly broadens the tight focus of the first generation of realists include Don Brown, Will Cotton, Amie Dicke, Hilary Harkness, Marcus Harvey, Sean Henry, Damien Loeb, Grayson Perry, Richard Phillips, Marc Quinn, Alexis Rockman, Xavier Veihan, Kara Walker, Cynthia Westwood, and Lisa Yuskavage. Just as surely as the history of realism is being rewritten, the collectors are on the move, participating in the expanded discussion by supporting new art, which gives the collection its particular liveliness and a fluidity of range to what we might think of as prototypical realism.

Two reasonable approaches to examining the collection are to think in terms of historic groupings, such as Pop Art and Photorealism, and to categorically break down these ninety-some reproductions into groupings according to subject matter. Portraits are in the lead, followed by American scene/landscape, the female nude, still life, and self-portraits. No one subject can be singled out as most important, and each general category includes iconic works by American masters as well as works by younger, international artists who push the canon with thought-provoking work.



Central to the early development of the collection is the inclusion of numerous artists connected to Pop Art, which in the 1960s was the hottest movement in art, readily accepted by broad audiences due to its basis on imagery drawn from the everyday realities of the commercial world dominant in American culture. Artists were quickly assimilated into the market system and packaged in a way that reflected corporate models. Included in the collection are groundbreaking artists such as Jim Dine, Marisol, Robert Rauschenberg, Larry Rivers, James Rosenquist, and George Segal, all of whom considered the contemporary world as “a painting in itself,” infinitely quotable in fractions or whole parts. They all were on the scene early in their careers with a more radical and experimental art that brought the viewer’s perception of reality into question by incorporating actual consumer products and detritus into their work, which at times bordered on kitsch. They produced large enough bodies of work, however, for the critics to seriously debate. These artists further expanded the physical plane and created a greater sense of theater in art, both of which were important developments in art.

Pop artists are credited with the return of the nude in art. The examples in the collections by Robert Overby, Mel Ramos, John Wesley, and Tom Wesselmann are sexually charged fantasy images that play out in divergent styles. Younger artists who continue to consider the female image in the world of advertising include Hilo Chen, Amie Dicke, and Richard Phillips. In fact, there is no more contemporary an example of a return to Pop Art than Phillips’s *Sissel* (2002), a larger-than-life red, white, blue, and blonde deadpan portrait of a woman showing us a diamond ring in a velvet box. The chilled expression on her flawless face is painted on the scale of a commercial billboard and is a manifestation and mirror of the strangely real, grand obsession with youth culture and luxury objects that is the lifeblood of contemporary America.

The cool, detached style of the Photorealists is mediated by the use of photography and sometimes airbrush to obtain veracity in an image. The viewer makes an instant connection with the person, place, or object in the painting, but artists also ingrained in their images cultural truths for us to ponder. Diners, shop windows, city streets, bridges, fire trucks, and parades are classic subjects for the Photorealist. In the collection are archetypal works by John Baeder, Tom Blackwell, Davis Cone, Robert Cottingham, Don

Eddy, Ralph Goings, Ron Kleemann, and Idelle Weber. As seen in Weber's *Cooper Union Trash* (1974), we are confronted squarely with a dirty reality. It focuses on a familiar scene that, though unpeopled, is a telling portrait of American consumer values.

The tightness of Photorealism gave way to a more expressionistic approach as the 1970s progressed. Among the artists in the collection who have worked in a less tightly wrought style are Jennifer Bartlett, Romare Bearden, Richard Diebenkorn, Eric Fischl, Neil Jenney, Fairfield Porter, Richard Prince, and Lisa Yuskavage. Exemplifying extremes of style are Philip Pearlstein and Eric Fischl. Pearlstein's *Two Nudes with Horse Weathervanes & Punch* (1988) is a highly controlled painting of a studio interior, a classic, almost academic, setup. This painting is hard-edged and harsh, from the lighting and claustrophobic space to the gravity that seems to pull the figures down to an almost lifeless state. The polar opposite of Pearlstein's work is Fischl's sun-drenched *Lapping Sounds Along the Shore* (1996–97), a painterly image encoded with complex psychological readings that defy the lift caused by an initial glance. This work transmits the clear but elusive experience of that moment in life when all the good stuff is happening, the rare but real stuff we later relish in memory with yearning and anxiety, because we always knew it could not last.

Many realists have dedicated themselves almost exclusively to portraits and self-portraits, a favorite subject for artists throughout history. In recent decades, the symbolic aspect of portraiture has expanded to include the heroic, ideal images of man associated with ancient Greek sculpture. Nicolas Afri-
cano, Stephan Balkenhol, William Beckman, Don Brown, Will Cotton, John De Andrea, Till Freiwald, Tim Gardner, Gregory Gillespie, Robert Graham, Sean Henry, Alex Katz, Karen Kilim-
nik, Robert Longo, Alice Neel, Evan Penny, Richard Phillips, Marc Quinn, Kiki Smith, Xavier Veilhan, and Lisa Yuskavage all play with encoded notions of beauty, and in so doing, their work becomes a compelling commentary on human frailty, insecurity, narcissism, and spiritual and moral decay.



One of the most startling portraits in the collection is Marc Quinn's white marble sculpture, *Selma Mustajbasic* (2000), which is modeled after a young woman who is an amputee. This work obliterates the Platonic ideal, yet imitates its material, proportion, and smooth finish. By choosing to sculpt human forms that are physically imperfect, Quinn resolutely denies the body as important to the realities of existence, yet strangely relates the amputation to fragmentation of antiquities. Moreover, he infers that our interior life completes us, a reference to spirituality that is relatively out of favor today.

In images of the landscape, artists choose to signify the action and residue of our existence, abbreviating the details of the story to intensify the reality. Herein lies the most pressing political commentary in the realist genre, a fascinating subject too extensive to discuss fully, but which is encapsulated in the work of two artists whose artistic choice could not be more contrary. Kara Walker's *Shiny Penny* (1995) is a jet-black cutout silhouette that depicts an absolutely perverse and threatening story that is both easy and difficult for the viewer to complete in detail. This simple work speaks volumes as an historic narrative of the American South and of depravity in general. Conversely, Alexis Rockman's *Disneyworld II* (2005) is painted in the high traditional style of the Hudson School, filled with detail that forecasts the future as a grim reality

resulting from casual and careless human actions. Here we see the fast-forward chronicle of society's legacy foretold by Idelle Weber's trash bin.

Walker and Rockman's political and moral messages affect new analysis of the collection. James Rosenquist's cellophane-wrapped doll, Alex Katz's *Amanda*, and Jennifer Bartlett's boat at the sandy shore, all lose their offhand innocence and accrue a strangely ominous nuance. In fact, if we look at this new generation of artists in the Seavest Collection, we see indicators of the realities of the post-9/11 world, which challenges our previous perspectives of a bridge, a skyscraper, a shop window, a fire truck, or an airplane.

Art is often viewed strictly in the marketplace in cold terms as a commodity to be bought and sold. The Seavest Collection of Contemporary Realism is evidence that it is indeed more than that. These works attest to the enduring and expressive power of realism. The collection, shared in this forum, conveys the capacity of artists to describe our cities and the people in them with an unflinching eye, as well as their ability to embed in their work the economics and politics of our time, and informs us of the high value placed on art as part of our everyday existence.

Dede Young
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Lisa Yuskavage¹⁹⁶³⁻

Though less audacious and provocative than her earlier works, which were branded with such titles as *Asspicking*, *Foodeating*, *Headshrinking*, *Socialclimbing*, and *Motherfucking Bad Habits* (1996), Lisa Yuskavage's recent paintings continue to marry the classical female nude with authentically déclassé, contemporary sexuality.¹ After abandoning wholly fictional characters in favor of a real-life model, Yuskavage again changed her source material to found pop-culture images, painting most often from 1970s *Penthouse* photo spreads. As part of this new approach, *Pajamas* appears as an idealized-but-real figure, simultaneously evocative of the clichéd props, passive demeanor, and open bits of clothing associated with soft-core pornography but firmly rooted in a seductively beautiful style that restricts the viewer from an exaggerated erotic reaction.

Like many others, Yuskavage faced the difficulty of depicting the female nude while remaining a contemporary artist. In earlier work, Yuskavage found the solution in the mannerist distortions of “bloated bellies, elongated necks,” and hyperbolic buttocks that symbolized the burden of sexual attributes and their use in modern culture.² The appropriation of conventionally attractive women from the pages of *Penthouse*, however, drew her work further away from

the grotesque, staging a more seductive relationship with the viewer that is, ironically, less confrontational.

Pajamas also develops its modernity by serving as a contemporary reworking of Degas' pastels of women in intimate settings. Employing a similar use of a single color, the work abandons Degas' monotype gray in favor of a soft red that unites the figure and foreground. Yuskavage also adopts Degas' alchemical backlighting of the figure, using the technique to imply a narcissistic admiration that nearly succeeds in containing the light from escaping behind her reach.³ In order to save the nude from any such stereotype, though, Yuskavage portrays her with downcast eyes that suggest she has accepted her role as a sex symbol but that she still yearns for something more real.

Through its elegant and meditative silence, Yuskavage continues to obliquely remind her viewer of the absence of such qualities in their sexual realities, all the while harkening the “enduring possibility of their renaissance.”⁴ The result is a *Penthouse* image painted with a tenderness that combats and ultimately overwhelms its role as an idiomatic commodity.

¹ Seigel, “Local Color,” 15-16.

² Ibid., 15, 17.

³ Ibid., 19.

⁴ Seigel, “Local Color,” 20; Hall, “Painterly Paradoxes,” 26-27.

Hall, “Painterly Paradoxes,” 28.

Ibid.

Ibid., 27.



Pajamas 2002
Pastel on paper, 12 1/2" x 9 1/2"