

The Nation

What Truths Can You Divine From Instagram Paintings?

How the act of scrutinizing art online has changed the role of the critic.

By Barry Schwabsky, August 4, 2020.



Andrea Marie Breiling's studio. (Courtesy of the artist)

Which is the real work of art: the one on the wall or the one in your mind after you've seen it? Which counts more, the object or the experience? I've long insisted that it is impossible to evaluate an artwork—and especially, perhaps, if it's a painting—without seeing it firsthand. The only exceptions are works made specifically for reproduction—in other words, certain (but not all) kinds of conceptual art, but also graphic arts, comics, and the like. Otherwise, reproductions (whether printed or digital) just don't do the trick of communicating a work's innate materiality, however rarefied or seemingly intangible that materiality may be. As the painter Rafael Vega recently told me, reflecting on the move by galleries to take more of their business online, "Like it or not, we need physical space to show those objects, because [paintings] exist in a real time and place. At least for now, I don't see how online shows can do the same thing."

Of course, I have to admit that I have not always been able to keep strictly to this rule. I've sat on committees and juries that have had to make decisions on awards and fellowships for artists or admissions for artists' colonies, workshops, and MFA programs, and we've almost always had to make our decisions based on secondhand images of the work. We did our best, trying collectively to divine, from the colored shadows tossed on the wall by a projector and with the help, sometimes, of some words from the artist, what was being attempted and, to some degree, accomplished. But our best never really felt as good as it should be.

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And yet, being unable to see real works of art in person for months has made me realize just how much I have come to depend on seeing works online—and how I get more from that experience than I'd been willing to admit. I have not felt much desire to delve into the online offerings of galleries and museums, but nonetheless I have been seeing lots of art onscreen—it's just that I've been getting it straight from the artists, mainly via their Instagram accounts. I've liked that. One reason is shyness: I don't have to announce my having seen the work or interact with the artist if I'm not inclined to do so. In that way, looking at artists' Instagram posts is more like visiting a gallery than visiting a studio—less personal, potentially more anonymous. And it's a mostly visual experience; the textual dimension is secondary. Something catches your eye or it doesn't—that's the easy part—but when it holds your attention for more than the moment it takes to click “like,” the *why* and *how* of that hold are complicated and mysterious enough to become interesting in themselves. In other words, there's a lot you don't know about what you're seeing when you see a painting online, and that sense of unknowing—of mystery—can become part of the truth of the experience.

One artist I've been following online for a few years is Christina Quarles. I know more about her than I do about many of the other artists whose work catches my eye on Instagram, because she's quickly become well-known: Her art has evidently caught the eye of quite a few people. Since graduating from Yale's MFA program in 2016, she's exhibited widely, not only in Los Angeles, where she now lives, but as far afield as Shanghai and London; an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in her hometown, Chicago, should have opened in April, but was postponed until next year. Her exhibitions (not only in prominent galleries but in museums such as the Hepworth Wakefield in West Yorkshire, England, and the Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive) have been widely covered in the press, especially in the United Kingdom. She has not yet had a solo show in New York, so I've never seen anything of hers in person.

Quarles's style could be called a kind of twisted figuration—unless it's quite the opposite, a form of abstraction pushed against its inclination to become figurative. It seems to reflect a half-dystopian, half-hedonistic intuition that the body's plasticity might be far more radical than everyday experience suggests. One can see her work as part of a tradition that encompasses Francis Bacon's desire to create figures that might be, as he once said, “made out of something, which is completely irrational from the point of view of being an illustration,” or of André Masson's automatist paintings with their metamorphizing of animal/human forms, but there is a distinctly contemporary cool to her interpretation of this figurative legacy, which could just as easily be compared to the way certain electronic music producers compose their pieces out of cut-up bits of other songs that feel familiar, though, because they've been slowed down or sped up, you can't quite recognize them. And because I know from what I've read about Quarles that she identifies as biracial and queer, I can understand that her impulse to reinvent the image of the body might have a political dimension.

On May 22, Quarles posted a new painting, made in quarantine, titled *Behold! And Be Held Beside Me*. It shows a blurry-faced, purplish-hued figure lying prone, knees up, in a field of flowers. The figure, of indeterminate gender, has weirdly twisted legs and long, long, rubbery arms hanging down in front of a white picket fence. Behind we glimpse three heads and a pair of arms hugging. Are they the dream of the apparently sleeping figure in the foreground? Sweetness and grotesquerie coexist in the imagery but also in Quarles's almost too rich palette. The hues of the heads and bodies, as well as of the flowers, seem to blur translucently into one another like watercolor, while those of the background landscape—earth and foliage simplified into a sequence of curving reddish-brown and green stripes with a strip of blue at the top—and the white fence in front are opaque, their forms more crisply defined. The white, I can tell even from the digital image, is textured, perhaps slightly impastoed. Are the other colors painted as thinly and smoothly as they look to me, or if I could see the work in person, would they have a similar tactility? My longing to see the painting closely is both an element in the ambivalent pleasure I nonetheless derive from its bodiless image and a kind of promise

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that the real painting has something more to offer—that it does not just picture a body but somehow is a body, that it does not exist merely for the sake of the image it bears.

Another Los Angeles-based painter I've been following, though not as long, is Andrea Marie Breiling. Since getting her MFA from the Claremont Graduate University in 2014, she's shown mostly with LA galleries, but also with one in Düsseldorf, Germany. But there's not much information on her in circulation—no interviews or articles that I can find, just a brief quote on the Facebook page of a gallery where she was in a group show: "I work abstractly so it's about composition and color and you have to think about it like mathematics. But when I'm finished with the work I want it to become a memorial for a time or place. It's a moment of meditation to create something using color and materials." I don't even know when she was born, though I know that it happened in Phoenix.

The first paintings of Breiling's that I noticed, probably around 2018, seemed to derive from a European approach to abstraction. I thought, for instance, of the Danish artist Per Kirkeby or of the later work of Günther Förg in Germany—a kind of roughed-up painterliness, with conglomerations of vibrantly colored brush marks refusing to meld into distinct forms but retaining their separate identities against a ground of bare canvas. Despite her professedly mathematical approach to structure, Breiling's touch communicates urgency. The paintings attracted me, but only more recently did they begin to fascinate me, when I noticed a change in their character. The new works feature a different kind of mark making, less scruffy and agitated and less likely to gravitate together into dense clumps. Now the paintings are dominated by more extended linear gestures, often in concentric, diamond-like formations counterpoised to an armature of central horizontal and vertical lines—all this in a combination of thickly painted strokes and what appears to be spray paint. Even more of the canvas has been left unpainted; the colors are brighter, clearer; all in all, there is a sense of lightness and speed new to the artist's work. A clear, simple structure allows for great freedom, a sense of "everything goes," and it's wonderfully exhilarating.

So exhilarating is the feeling I get from Breiling's work, even just on the screen, that when I began to think about writing this essay and sorting through my ideas about which artists to include, she was the first one I thought of. But using social media as a repository of memories has its drawbacks: When I went to her profile to take another look at the images that had made such an impression on me, they were all gone. She'd removed everything except images related to Black Lives Matter. So I wrote to ask her to send me some images to mull over. Now we're in touch—I've never had any direct contact with the other artists I'm discussing here—and so the potential transiency of digital images has turned from a drawback into an opportunity to learn more. But even at secondhand, as seen through my phone, Breiling's art shows a radiance and vitality that speaks for itself; it tells me there's something there, even if I can't quite make out, at this distance, what it is.

It's only been this year that I've noticed the work of Maja Ruznic. She was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1983. After civil war broke out nine years later, she and her mother spent three years moving through various refugee camps before landing in the United States. In 2009 she received an MFA from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco, and she now lives in Roswell, N.M. Since 2012 she's had solo shows at small galleries in Stockholm, Los Angeles, and Sarajevo, among other places, but most often in Dallas. And she seems to be on the verge of becoming still better known, as her online bio includes upcoming shows with dates still to be determined—presumably delayed because of the Covid-19 pandemic—at prominent galleries in London and New York. And it's not only about art that I learn from Instagram: I can also see that since I started working on this article, Ruznic has become a mother.

Ruznic's paintings are pretty hard to "read" online, and yet their unfathomability is part of what drew me to them: There's a dreamy, quasi-Symbolist vibe to her figurative compositions, through which diaphanous personae float. To quote a poem by Charles Simic

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from which she drew the title of “My Noiseless Entourage,” her exhibition earlier this year at the Conduit Gallery in Dallas, her work is “like a discreet entourage / Of home-grown angels and demons / All of whom I had met before / And had since largely forgotten.” I’d be most curious to see the surfaces of these paintings up close: From what I can tell from the jpegs, the pigment seems rubbed into the canvas in sparse quantities, but some passages look quite dry and powdery and others more fluid, almost molten. Figures melt into each other and into the space they inhabit. The boundaries between forms are permeable, uncertain. So are the narratives in mind for her paintings. Instead the accent, or perhaps the narrative she wants to put across, is on the idea that there are goings-on in the world that are inaccessible to a purely empirical perception—soul events, you might say.

If that kind of language sets off alarms, I understand. This work might be hovering on the edge of being too fey for its own good. Are the paintings stuck in a nebulous dreamworld? It’s precisely their ambiguity that reassures me that if I could see them in person, I’d find them convincing. It seems that these unspoken spectacles derive more from Ruznic’s exploration of her materials than from a predetermination to put a certain message across, and that very fact, paradoxically, means that there is a fundamental physical reality, accessible to touch and vision, underwriting whatever spiritual message I imagine being communicated. The artist is not pretending to know more than she really can know. On Instagram, Ruznic posts close-up details more often than entire paintings, as if to emphasize that the work’s truth is in its materiality—and that every painting contains within itself a multitude of possible paintings.

Seemingly at an opposite pole from Ruznic’s tenuous phantasmatic visions is the often ferocious, sometimes grotesque pictorial imagination of Peter Williams. He’s an artist that I didn’t discover via social media—though I follow him now on Instagram—but in a more old-fashioned way: I saw a painting of his, earlier this year, reproduced on a book’s cover. The book is a new novel by one of my very favorite writers, Lynn Crawford’s *Paula Regossy*, but the cover image so fascinated me that I almost had to force myself to move past it to the book’s interior. The painting, in what I’d call an almost aggressively fruity palette, seemed to be a sort of abstract equivalent to an M.C. Escher image, endlessly twisting itself around itself in some impossible way. It was precisely this sense of impossibility, and of a kind of self-enclosed endlessness, that sent my brain into overdrive and that also—once I finally forced myself to get past the cover to read the book itself—seemed a perfect complement for Crawford’s simultaneously blunt and evasive mix of fantasy and realism, much influenced by the structural gamesmanship of the French OuLiPo group. The name of Crawford’s protagonist turns out to be an anagram of the name of the James Bond character that Williams used as the title of his painting: Pussy Galore. *Paula Regossy* is a spy story too, but of a very different kind from Ian Fleming’s.

What I know about Williams from searching on the Internet is that he is an African American in his late 60s, living in Wilmington, Del., where he teaches at a state university. He has a substantial national exhibition history, including several shows in New York that I somehow missed—the most recent at the Cue Art Foundation in 2018. More typical of Williams’s work than Pussy Galore are figurative paintings that I see in the lineage of Peter Saul and Robert Colescott going back to, maybe, James Ensor and Otto Dix—painters ruthless in their use of humor, exaggeration, and even vulgarity to skewer the wrongs and follies of society. The disruptive energy of Williams’s art is probably best encapsulated by the title of his current exhibition (through October 10) at Paul Kotula Projects in Ferndale, Mich., in the Detroit metropolitan area: “Peter Williams: Mass Murder.”

The one thing Williams’s figurative paintings share with his abstractions is their intense, assertive, joyously inharmonious color. The compositions are crowded and raucous and sometimes feature a Black everyman figure who is both protagonist and witness: a worried-looking superhero dressed in an orange uniform emblazoned with a big “N” above “WORD” in smaller print. Perhaps not surprisingly, among the newest pieces I’ve seen on Williams’s Instagram feed are two captioned *The arrest of George Floyd*, posted

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June 12, and *The ascension of St. George Floyd* posted July 10. There's no superhero in sight in these paintings. In *The arrest*, the central figure is trapped within a kind of abstract geometrical structure (not so distant from something one might see in one of Williams's abstract works), where he is held in place by a plethora of white hands grabbing at his legs, torso, arms, and head, although those hands seem to have no reality except when they have their grip on him. At the lower edges of the painting are a pair of inset heads—black on the left, white on the right—both apparently behind prison bars. Around these heads are inscriptions pointing to millions of guilty whites, millions of imprisoned blacks. In *The ascension*, wearing a halo that seems to double as a space helmet, he appears to be taking off, arms stretched out like a dancer's and with just one foot still on this blue planet, into a solar realm where the angels (or possibly ancestors) are prepared to receive him. One online interlocutor gave a thumbs-up to "All those angels," and the artist responded, "I hope, could be some white debil's [sic]." There is a terrible tenderness to this painting, and maybe it has to do with that apprehension that oppression might continue even in the beyond.

There's good reason to maintain some doubt about what you're really seeing when you see a painting onscreen and to be suspicious of art that's easily consumed in that mode. It might easily be what the critic Rob Colvin dismissed a few years ago as "Like Art": that is, "art that looks very much like art you've already seen, that you know very well, and that you already like" and is momentarily pleasing—gets a lot of "likes"—for just that reason. But just as when you see it on the wall in a gallery, a painting that raises more questions than it answers online might well have staying power. Williams's paintings are anything but easygoing or ingratiating. I'm hoping to commune with them in person—and the same goes for the work of Quarles, Breiling, and Ruznic—if ever fate allows it.