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[Jenny Saville](#)
[Hyphen](#)
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[Philip Guston](#)
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[Hyman Bloom](#)
[The Hull](#)
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FLESH PERSPECTIVE

by Sidney Lawrence

"Paint Made Flesh," June 20-Sept. 13, 2009, at the Phillips Collection, 1600 21st St., NW, Washington, D.C. 20009

At first glance, "Paint Made Flesh" is a summer crowd-pleaser, promising vacationing museum-goers the comforts of figurative painting and maybe even a taste of art's famed hedonism. After all, the gallery is using for its advertising a detail of yBa Jenny Saville's *Hyphen* (1999), her luscious and dare we say kinky painting of twin baby-faced behemoths, wearing dazed expressions that could easily be characterized as Bacchanalian.

Alas, no such luck. The impulse here is overwhelmingly expressionistic -- dark, distorted and downtrodden. On tour from the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, the show presents 43 paintings made over the past 50 years by 34 artists, primarily American, British and German. When Frist curator Mark Scala refers to paint as a medium



[Willem de Kooning](#)
[Woman](#)
[1953-54](#)



[Pablo Picasso](#)
[The Artist and His Model](#)
[1964](#)

"uniquely suited to convey the carnal properties of flesh," he would seem to be thinking of sexuality overshadowed by the inevitable presence of death.

Thus, the show boasts Leon Golub's *Napalm II* (1969), a bodyscape of scraped, bloodied, burn-unit flesh, as well as Philip Guston's *Web* (1975), a truncated figure who stares blankly into a pool of blood while caught in the web of two spiders.

Equally morbid is Hyman Bloom's *The Hull* (1952), a raw, Soutine-ish, butcher-block-red depiction of a cadaver being sliced apart, and Alice Neel's El-Greco-esque *Randall in Extremis* (1960), in which a gaunt, dying young man poses by a window, reminiscent of Ed Harris about to end it in *The Hours*.

The poor female model is similarly brutalized, shredded in a cascade of pinks, whites, yellows and blues by Willem de Kooning, and turned into a spastic heap of lumps in Pablo Picasso's *The Artist and His Model* (1964).

The naked male comes off even worse, if that is possible. For Eric Fischl, the male nude is a senile old man, stumbling naked down an empty hospital corridor. And Lucian Freud, in his famous portrait of performance artist Leigh Bowery, renders the model a gross mountain of flesh.

The Bay Area figurative group free themselves a bit from this Post-War anomie -- perhaps it's something



[Eric Fischl](#)
[Frailty Is a Moment of Self-Reflection](#)
[1996](#)



[David Park](#)
[Male Nudes at the Water](#)
[1957](#)

in the California air. Joan Brown's galumphing *Girl in Chair* (1963) turns a traditional studio nude comical with mountainous heaps of vermilion, orange, blues, umbers, Naples yellow and just a smidgen of flesh tone. Variations on Brown's kind of thick, semi-abstract impasto are seen in paintings by Richard Diebenkorn and David Park as well. America's Eden could not be more appealing.

More contemporary artists -- the Post-Modernist ones, at least -- have more elaborate artistic strategies. In John Currin's *The Hobo* (1999), Fragonard meets Norman Rockwell in a luminous painting of a barely dressed, on-the-road hippie chick whose eroticism is as strange as it is pronounced. The Belgian painter Michaël Borremans, whose photo-based technique has an easy, silvery sparkle, gives us a portrait of a Bogart-suave man with a blemish or two. You could almost talk to this illusion in oil.

The Puerto Rican artist Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, who shows with Walter Otero Gallery in San Juan, represents a mystical approach. The artist's *We Have to Eat* (1986), a monumental portrait -- perhaps a self-portrait -- is a jumble of squiggly paint scrapes that suggest tropical vegetation. The image is built up of yellows, oranges, grays, whites and browns, with not one smidgen of "flesh" color.

The final painting in the exhibition, which ends the



[**John Currin**](#)
[*The Hobo*](#)
[1999](#)
[Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego](#)



[**Daniel Richter**](#)
[*Duisen*](#)
[2004](#)
[David Zwirner Gallery](#)

show with a bang, is Daniel Richter's dizzyingly psychedelic *Duisen* (2004), seen recently in his show at David Zwirner in New York. A packed, Ensor-esque street crowd of some 30 people, reaching to the sky as if in a rave, is rendered in multi-colored splashes, stains and streaks. Outlines of city buildings appear on a black field behind. The scene, says the artist, represents the surge of global immigration -- an invasion of people of color, you might say -- into traditionally lily-white Germany.

"Paint Made Flesh" is, perhaps, an exhibition of modest ambitions. Many of the paintings are familiar, as are most of the artists included. The show could have a bit more color, so to speak, as it does not include works by Kerry James Marshall, Robert Colescott or other artists who would have added an extra dimension. Also absent, come to think of it, is Judy Chicago. Perhaps her work was considered (again) too flesh-aggressive. Overall, about a quarter of the artists in the show are women.

In the esthetic battles of the modernist era, figurative painting has forever been fighting rearguard actions. But as the contemporary art world becomes ever more international, images of the human figure -- especially those of the sort found in "Paint Made Flesh" -- remain touchstones in the struggle for individual freedom against repressive social control, whether in the developing world or here at home.

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