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Sarah Peters, *Charioteer*, 2018, bronze, 11 × 9 × 12½".



Kyle Staver, *Psyche's Watch*, 2018, oil on canvas, 68 × 58".



Ellen Berkenblit, *Lines Roar*, 2018, HD video, color, sound, 12 minutes 21 seconds.

# HUMAN NATURE

DAN NADEL ON THE ART OF ELLEN BERKENBLIT,  
CARROLL DUNHAM, SARAH PETERS, AND KYLE STAVER

**ATTEMPTING TO RENDER** what it is to be human is an absurd task, which makes it all the more urgent. We are long past the postwar afterglow of the “Family of Man” and other ultimately exclusionary attempts at unity. To know that and yet to pursue unironic ideas about our collective condition—despite all current political, social, and theoretical factors—is a profound act of faith in art. The artists Ellen Berkenblit, Carroll Dunham, Sarah Peters, and Kyle Staver are creating internally consistent speculative spaces in which to explore and, possibly, recuperate the idea that art is capable of representing what it’s like to be human. These “worlds” are empyrean, prelapsarian, suspended in an archaic “time” that exists outside of time. Shaped and inflected by ancient myths, Biblical stories, and other deep strata of human culture, but also by twentieth-century popular illustration, these artists’ work suggests a simultaneous longing to return to Eden and an awareness that we cannot do so—and that even if we could, Eden itself likely wasn’t so Edenic.



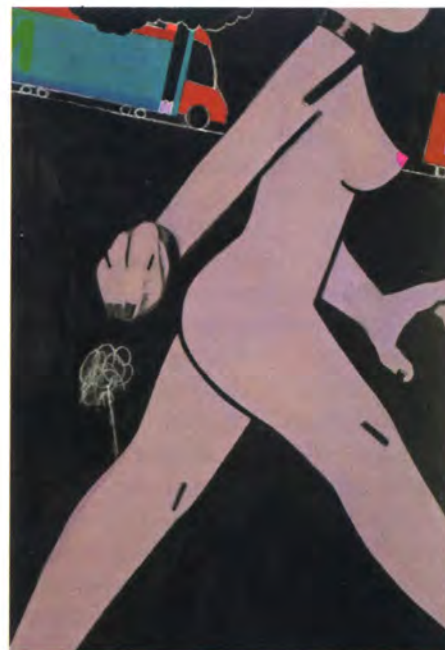
Above: Two stills from Ellen Berkenblit's *Lines Roar*, 2018, HD video, color, sound, 12 minutes 21 seconds.  
 Right: Ellen Berkenblit, *Mrs. R.*, 2018, oil, paint stick, and charcoal on calico, 61 x 45".

As suggested by *Figurehead's* morphology, Peters is not an illusionist. She telegraphs her awareness of the work as an object that the viewer needs to approach from one direction and experience frontally before moving around it. There's no need for an entrance point, or an animal guide, since these objects exist with you in real space. Peters subtly reminds the viewer that this space is political. *Figurehead* is a loaded object, and although it doesn't tell you what to think, it does remind you who, historically, has gotten to paint and sculpt what and what the implications of those restrictions have been. At the same time, Peters proposes a female-centric, sex-positive

vision of power. *Figurehead* and *Charioteer* could be in the grip of orgasmic ecstasy, but their abandon is not in tension with their self-possession—quite the contrary, their uninhibited sexuality is inextricable from their strength. The artist's uncompromising treatment of hair, which functions as both character trait and support, amplifies this sense of empowered sexuality; the hair becomes the site of a kind of controlled chaos, and is the only element of the work where the artist's hand makes itself apparent. The wavy lines, which are created by drawing in clay and refined further in the mold and casting process, could be brain waves, thought itself captured as restless movement.

All four artists pursue humanist projects even as they problematize humanism and carefully navigate its original sins.

**BERKENBLIT**, whose film *Lines Roar*, 2018, was on view this past spring and summer at the Drawing Center in New York, is a master of swooping tresses and dramatic manes; her figures exude the same elegance and regal humor as Peters's while also recalling Staver's playful sensuality. She has been painting strong, willful women and animals since the '80s. Berkenblit's pictures were once populated mainly by misbegotten maidens who seemed to have wandered out of a fairy tale; now they are visions of witches and demigoddesses interlocking within a painterly space articulated by sudden flashes of color-drenched light, graphic symbols, and unashamed handwork. Berkenblit's bodies in motion dominate a tightly controlled pictorial world. Uniformly costumed, her protagonists are visual and spiritual counterparts of Dunham's wrestlers, performing the "feminine" with a verve more than equal to his theatrics of masculinity, albeit to different ends.



In paintings like *Mrs. R.*, 2018, and *Earth Flowers*, 2018, her women, witches, and animals (and trucks) move across the picture plane—and through time—with the relentless audacity of Peters's *Figurehead*. "The female form feels inevitable for me to make my work though," Berkenblit recently wrote. "I don't think of it as a power symbol. I'm not sure I think of it as a symbol at all—but, if I do, I think of it as 'my symbol.'" Her pictures' ordered space is open and permissive, replete with other—happy or anxiety-producing—symbols: flowers, clocks, machines. If Dunham's wrestlers are exteriorized aggression, a meditation on manhood writ large in a primal land, Berkenblit's women display their brio by navigating, and surviving within, a contemporary space of pleasures and hazards. Her tigers and cats, meanwhile, seem at once totems and companions.

*Lines Roar* demonstrates how these pictures are built. It is a meditative collage of footage of Berkenblit painting and drawing—sometimes on Plexiglas, so that the image appears as though brought to life by invisible hands. As we watch each stroke, as forms and textures emerge, what comes through—as in the carving of hair in Peters's sculptures, Dunham's knotted, matted manes, and Staver's highlights on flesh—is a sense of minutely concentrated focus on small motions to create maximum impact. With Berkenblit, we are never far from a gestural, almost balletic approach to mark-making. It's *this* close to expressionism. It doesn't quite get there, but Berkenblit's paintings are still as much a record of their own physical creation as they are representations of an alternative reality.

The works of Berkenblit—and Peters, Dunham, and Staver—seem, ultimately, to emerge from an unabashed effort to convey something nonverbal, an impulse to activate feelings that must be shouted, wrestled, danced, and levitated. They urge us to locate our own generosity of spirit and to share intense emotions not usually sanctioned in daily life. Which is to say, these artists offer a way to expand our affective worlds. They pursue humanist projects even as they problematize humanism and carefully navigate its original sins. The patriarch is made a figure of fun or banished entirely, and his structure of unjust, violently enforced binaries and hierarchies goes with him. The subjectivity of nonhuman beings is brought into the fold of the human. With formal generosity and figural drama, these artists offer us sublime visions in which the proposition that we can reimagine and rehabilitate this tormented tradition is the most transgressive idea of all. □

DAN NADEL'S BOOKS INCLUDE *THE COLLECTED HAIRY WHO PUBLICATIONS 1966-1969* (MATTHEW MARKS, 2015) AND *CHRIS MARTIN: PAINTINGS* (SKIRA, 2018). HE IS THE CURATOR OF "IMAGINED, OBSERVED, REMEMBERED: LANDSCAPES FROM THE JAN SHREM AND MARIA MANETTI SHREM MUSEUM," WHICH WILL OPEN AT THE JAN SHREM AND MARIA MANETTI SHREM MUSEUM OF ART IN JANUARY 2019.

Ellen Berkenblit, *Earth Flowers*, 2018, oil, paint stick, and charcoal on linen, 63 x 45".

