

Figure It Out

For over 40,000 years the human figure has been a vital subject in humanity's artistic endeavors. Often focusing on history, mythology, allegory or the imagination, most cultures on earth have recorded depictions of the human figure while in the visual arts produced in Alberta, the human figure has become one of the most prominent expressions among contemporary artists.

Figurative painting, referring to a type of representational art based on figure drawing, typically includes depictions of people in informal situations. At its most rudimentary level the TREX Region 2 exhibition **Figure It Out**, featuring paintings by three contemporary artists from Edmonton, is thus simply a collection of paintings that contain human figures.

As expressed by artist Jennie Vegt, however,

...as soon as you introduce a character into a painting, you introduce narrative.

The exhibition **Figure It Out** is therefore, about more than just human figures: it is also about story telling. Throughout history, artists have used the human figure to document the lives of people and everyday situations; explore political or social ideas; express beliefs; or investigate what it is to be human. Prior to the nineteenth century most figurative works were didactic in nature where the narrative, designed to teach moral lessons or record the exploits of 'heroic' figures, was usually discernible to most viewers. With the advent of impressionism and later artistic styles such as expressionism, symbolism and surrealism, however, the narrative nature of paintings became more ambiguous and the role of figures within paintings elusive.

The exhibition **Figure It Out** features works by Riki Kuropatwa, Jennie Vegt and Campbell Wallace. Each of these artists, while operating in different painting styles, use the human figure to create stories. The meanings of the stories they construct, however, are obscure. Rather than fabricating narratives that have only one precise meaning, these artists actively engage viewers, pulling them into the paintings to try to figure out the narratives while inviting them to create their own tales based on the scene. Through this active participation the stories presented, rather than being isolated incidents in intangible narratives, become the viewers' stories and the 'characters' portrayed...perhaps the viewers themselves.

The exhibition **Figure It Out** was curated by Shane Golby and organized by the Art Gallery of Alberta for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program. The AFA TREX program is financially supported by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

The Art Gallery of Alberta is pleased to present this travelling exhibition to venues throughout Alberta. Currently the Art Gallery of Alberta serves over 60 venues in approximately 35 communities. Exhibitions on tour from the Art Gallery of Alberta easily adapt to space requirements of smaller venues: schools, libraries, museums, health care centres and other community facilities. The exhibitions are organized in such a manner as to make unpacking, packing, hanging and shipping as easy as possible. Along with the exhibition, each venue receives an Educational Interpretive Guide. These materials enable teachers to use the exhibition within the school curriculum.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Collection is the primary source of works featured in the travelling exhibitions. Other sources for exhibitions may include community partners, archives, private collections and loans from artists. Each year we welcome new venues to enrich their community art through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program.

Our Thanks

The artists

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts

and to the many individuals, organizations and communities who contribute to the success of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program each year.

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The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

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Riki Kuropatwa
Petulant Chair, 2019
 Acrylic on Wood Panel
 Collection of the artist

Riki Kuropatwa was born and raised in Winnipeg but has lived in Edmonton since 2004. As described by Kuropatwa, she has ...always drawn as far back as I can remember. For Kuropatwa, drawing is an extension of who she is as a person and if she has anything to draw on, she draws.

After High School Kuropatwa did a Bachelor of Fine Arts Program in drawing at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. Upon graduation, she entered the Masters program at York University in Toronto. She graduated with a Masters of Fine Arts in 1996 and then in 2000 returned to University and did an Education After Degree at the University of Toronto. Following her education degree she started teaching art in a Middle School, which she did for a couple of years, and then moved to Edmonton. Shortly after her move she started teaching art at MacEwan University and then, in 2007, became a sessional instructor in Art Education at the University of Alberta.

Through all these moves and pursuits Kuropatwa was always making art and has always concentrated on the human figure. In the early stages of her career she tended on focus on the face but over the last fifteen years the whole figure and the human body has been her emphasis. When asked why she has concentrated on the figure Kuropatwa states:

We're made of the face/body. This is what we communicate with and to me these are everything. These are what I notice as a human being in the world and find endlessly fascinating.

Kuropatwa says that her current body of work, seen in the TREX exhibition **Figure It Out**, has all the things she loves. As she describes it, the facial expressions, posture, body language, human dramas, narratives and interactions between figures are beautiful and hilarious and everything in between. In her latest works she is also interested in what is going on around the figures; the 'place' is also important and part of the whole 'story' being related.

As an artist Kuropatwa has two aims. The first is simply to be an artist. Her second aim results from showing her work. As she indicates, in her work she aims to make art that is accessible to people:

I really want people to have a positive experience and be able to interact with my art: to be pulled into it creating their own narratives or appreciating the composition and formal part of the work. I want there to be that interaction.



Jennie Vegt
Portrait of Unique Constellations of Privilege and Oppression, 2021
 Acrylic, oil and spray paint on canvas
 Collection of the artist

Jennie Vegt was born and raised in Vernon, B.C.. She moved to Edmonton after high school and has been in the city every since. As related by Vegt, she always loved art and was always drawing. Her father was a photographer and she was always in his studio drawing portraits based on the people in his photographs.

Vegt began her post-secondary education at King's University in Edmonton. She originally started her studies in commerce with the plan to become an accountant. She quickly found, however, that she 'hated' the field and so switched to MacEwan University to study art. She did a diploma program in art at MacEwan and then, in 2009, moved to the University of Alberta to finish her Bachelor of Fine Arts, graduating in 2011.

Since graduation, Vegt has pursued two streams in her artwork. First, she does a number of portraits and commissions. She is also engaged in more personal, creative projects where she is freer to experiment. Whatever the aim of the work, however, the human figure is a dominant feature in her painting.

In her experimental works Vegt focuses on the creation of ambiguous narratives. In speaking of these she indicates that

...what drew me to painting was the ability to create my own narratives. I think the development of a character is interesting and that as soon as you introduce a character into a painting, you introduce narrative. I like to create stories that people can then create themselves.

As an artist, Vegt wants the viewer to enjoy her work on both aesthetic and emotional levels. She likes to encourage flexibility in thinking and hopes that viewers explore a work's narrative meanings and try to find multiple interpretations. As she describes this:

I want my work to stay open enough to grow with a person.

For Vegt, the title of this TREX exhibition is perfect as it has two main interpretations. First, the works in the exhibition are all figurative in nature. Secondly, the title speaks to the active participation of the viewer who has to figure out the possible narratives of the works and is presented with a challenge to figure out themselves; to figure out their own thought processes and why they have the interpretations they do.



Campbell Wallace
Ghosted, 2020
 Acrylic and oil on canvas
 Courtesy of the artist

Campbell Wallace was born and raised in Edmonton. He became interested in art when very young, stating that the idea that one could create/re-create something was magical to him.

Wallace took art in high school and really began to feel that art was what he wanted to do as a career. Attending the University of Alberta in Edmonton, he started in the Faculty of Education but in his third year switched to Fine Arts and graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 2000. Following graduation, he started working in the Fine Arts department and is now a technician in the department.

While a student, Wallace studied painting, sculpture and drawing. Whatever media he used, however, he has always focused on the human figure. While this focus was initially influenced by his desire to be a comic book artist/illustrator, he has always found the figure fascinating. As expressed by the artist:

...the tiniest bit of paint can change a whole picture and I find this endlessly fascinating and challenging.

Since his graduation, most of Wallace's imagery derives from found images/photographs, a process that directed his painting style to photo-realism. Although his present work is more playful in nature – he may add things or change things from the original source – all his work begins with a faithfulness to the original photograph.

As an artist Wallace wants his work to stay with the viewer. As he states:

By looking for found images, I'm trying to find a ready-made dialogue that affects me. I like to create an image that has an affect on me and (I hope) it will have an affect on the viewer.

By concentrating on found images Wallace is also acting as an archivist, preserving images he believes should be brought into the mainstream or to the attention of viewers.

For Campbell Wallace, the title of the TREX exhibition **Figure It Out** is a good one. At its most basic level, of course, the art works in it are about the human figure. He also hopes, however, that people will bring part of themselves to the exhibition: that they will engage with the work and be curious about what is going on in each piece and try to 'figure' the works out.