

Making the

(Hu



man) Connection



Are painters who paint people the luckiest painters in the world? After reading the stories of four of the most exciting artists working with the figure today, you'll think so.

By Maureen Bloomfield

To rephrase the song made popular by Barbra Streisand, artists who paint people need people. "I've had a few different careers," says British-born David Ladmore, "but all of them involved working with people. I don't think I'd be very good as a recluse on a deserted island." Indeed, you can't be a churl, working in grumpy isolation, if you paint the figure. Recruiting models or getting to know the subject of a portrait requires an affable temperament and more than a passing interest in the psyche, because you can't get away from working from life. Contemporary realist Philip Pearlstein has never wavered from that commitment. Placing nude models in repose, he studies their forms, as the painting evolves in response to what he sees and re-sees. Not every artist can afford to hire models for the months it may take Pearlstein to finish a picture; that's one of the reasons artists often recruit members of their families, as Edward Hopper did when his wife Jo became a character in his paintings. If you don't have a spouse at your disposal, is it cheating to use photos? No less a genius than Thomas Eakins consulted photographs and even required his students to do so, but if Eakins hadn't already known what to look for, he couldn't have made use of whatever help the photos afforded him. "I think that every painter is finally self-taught. Partly, you teach yourself by looking at great things," said contemporary master

Translating the Goddess to the Present Day

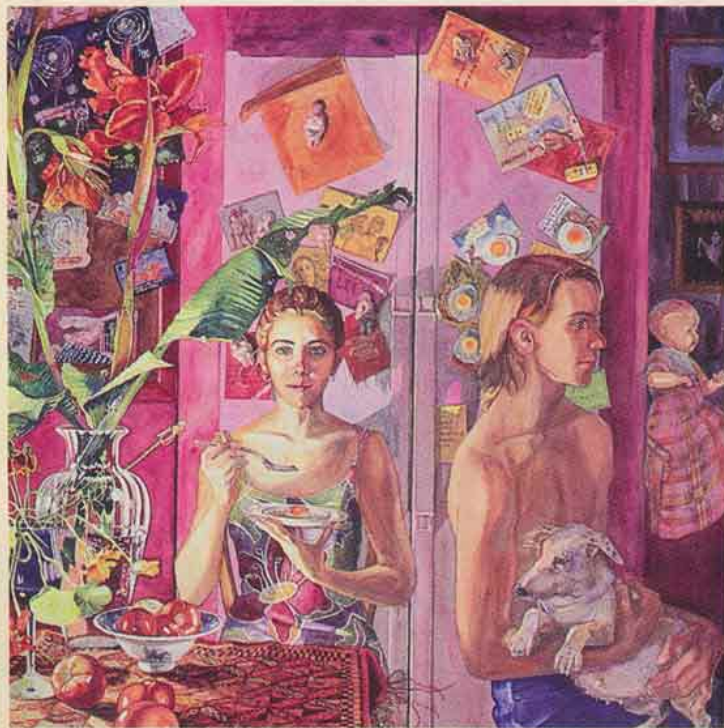
Kathleen Jardine surrounds the female figure with images that place her in an art historical context. In this detail of *Ten Thousand Years of Sacred Love* (appearing in its entirety on the next page) you can see images of Masaccio's *Eve (expelled from the Garden)* and Botticelli's *Venus (born from the sea)*. Note the recurring *Venus of Willendorf*, as well.

Painting from and in Life

During a break, the model, Lily, joined the artist on the floor where they drew and colored fishes culled from an encyclopedia, a practice Jardine was fond of when she was a child. Along with the artist's son Will, the angel fishes became part of Sugar (watercolor on paper, 40 x 40), a picture that's about, in Jardine's words, "the incomprehension between men and women and how remarkably early it starts."

Kathleen Jardine Aspect of Craft: A Grid To Start

"I think what I was doing early on was trying to transcribe to watercolor ideas traditional to oil painting, because I had a small baby, and it was less perilous to paint watercolor than to try to raise him in a studio with solvents," says Jardine. She prefers Lanaquarelle paper in the heaviest weight, which has now disappeared from the U.S. market. "It was the most wonderful stuff! The main reason I liked it is that it had no animal sizing, so it smelled good. I work off a roll and I try to square the thing up so that all my horizontals and verticals will be true in the painting. I learned how to work with a grid from Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). I make a perspective sketch so that the big objects are in perspective and actually vanish on the horizon line the way they're supposed to. I make the sketch and then I do a grid-to-grid transfer of the sketch so that I've got the basic placement of the large things fixed. At that point I start painting and enter the trance."



An Allegorical Tableau

In *Ten Thousand Years of Sacred Love* (watercolor on paper, 40 x 40) Jardine invokes Titian's famous painting, *Sacred and Profane Love* (c. 1515), which contrasts ideal/Platonic love with sexual love. Like Medieval and Renaissance masters, Jardine uses every element in a tableau to imply a meaning and/or advance a story.



William Bailey. Kathleen Jardine, whose masterly works appear here, echoes that sentiment: "I learned to paint by going to museums and looking carefully to try to understand what I was looking at, the magic of it, and I did a lot of reading." In other words, you can practice drawing hands or eyes for hours but you won't really know how to paint the figure until you learn how to see and to think about what you're seeing. To that end, we asked four of the best painters painting the figure today to let us in on what they're thinking—and how they're seeing—when they're at work.

KATHLEEN JARDINE

Painting from Life Is Part of Life

Award-winning artist Kathleen Jardine was already making a living as an artist when she entered graduate school to earn her MFA. "By the time I was three or so I was interested in the figure, in achieving a likeness and drawing the nude. I think that interest must have been genetically coded. I'm told that my great grandfather was a spy for Bismarck (the Prussian chancellor of the German Empire, 1871-90). My artist forebear toured the courts of Europe and drew people well enough that they were assassinated on the basis of his drawings." Inheriting talent, however, is only the beginning. "Although I'd always been somewhat good at capturing a likeness, I didn't seem to have a natural facility for creating the illusion of air around a figure. When I tried to understand how to render anything in the Western idiom, i.e., in an illusive space, I couldn't find anyone who could explain it to me. Gradually, I came to understand that the way to depict things spatially is, like lace making, a lost art. It was arduous, teaching myself how to

work with perspective and to create atmosphere around my figures.”

The Art of Association

In Jardine’s vast paintings every object has significance, yet her pictures are not fully planned at the start. Instead, they evolve as she interacts with the models. “People endear themselves to me when they come up to me and ask, ‘Can I be in one of your paintings?’ The resulting, commissioned paintings are allegories, not portraits. “The people who sit for me pay half the cost of the painting at the start; they don’t know what they’re going to get, yet I’ve never had a painting declined. My procedure is that I go to their houses and find things that I want to reproduce, and these elements become part of the tableaux. Sometimes people ask me if I can work certain things into the painting, and I generally can. Making art is associative. It’s things bouncing off one another. What happens is that things begin to come into the paintings; objects or images summon one another. A lot of things I wind up putting in the paintings are precious objects I don’t actually own, like the medieval tapestry (actually at the Metropolitan Museum of Art) in the painting of Lily (see *Little Lily and the Terrors of Christendom* at lower right), or the Venus of Willendorf, or quotations from paintings by Titian, Botticelli, et al. These precious images often end up, in my paintings, on the refrigerator as magnets. It seems to me that every sacred thing in our culture will eventually be reduced to a refrigerator magnet! Today the refrigerator has become a sort of shrine.”

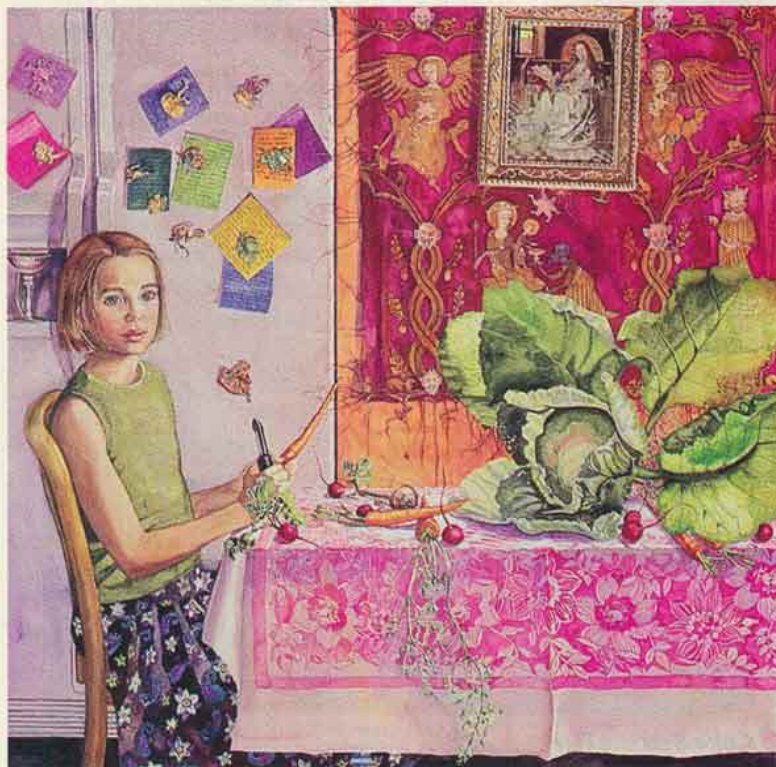
Inspiration: Responding to the Moment

That the work evolves in response to what is happening in and around it is fundamental to Jardine’s method: “Painting, making a painting, is not this sterilized thing that happens in a room that no one can enter except by some majestic decree. I know that tradition exists with artists—that you can’t disturb the genius at work, but my life has never been like that.” Jardine credits a life-changing event, the birth of her son, for bringing art and life together and in focus: “My son was—I detest the word, but I don’t know that else to call him—my muse. I brought him home from the hospital and laid him on a pile of newspapers and went to work and never stopped. I couldn’t take my eyes off him! I had been painting but I hadn’t been seized by this unifying idea: He was the most astonishing thing I’d ever seen. I used my son Will as a model (I

paid him, when he got older), and he still sits for me now. Today when I jury shows I see very little work that’s done from life. I see, instead, naive imagery and photo-realism: two ways that artists have come up with to avoid or postpone learning how to draw.”

Looking Until You See

Not being able to take your eyes off someone, being fully focused, being, as it were, transfixed, is perhaps the central pleasure of painting from life. “The basis of my work is that I peer at things,” she says. “As a child I would copy pages of images (birds, fishes, etc.) from the encyclopedia as a way of getting closer to those images. I see my work as part of another (along with perspective drawing) dying tradition, that of working from direct observation. In the 17th century in the Netherlands, people believed that they were looking at the mind of god when they were looking at the world. In the *Art of Describing* (1983, University of Chicago) Svetlana Alpers shows how this belief led to lens making: the idea of the micro and the macro universes. I think lens makers really thought that they were



Assembling Diverse Elements

“I tend to compress and flatten space; by compressing everything, I can obsessively attend to every tiny thing; it’s as if the whole painting is in focus,” says Jardine. “Every tiny thing” in *Little Lily and the Terrors of Christendom* (watercolor, 40 x 40) has meaning. Look for demons out of Bruegel, a priest’s vestment, and a madonna attributed to Rogier van der Weyden.

Nuances of Light

"If you are working with color and want to describe form, focus on the correct color and the form will take care of itself," says Ladmore, who feels as if an artist must be prepared to "scrub a painting or throw it out, but keep on going." *The Old Watercolour* (watercolor on paper, 13 x 9) is a portrait of the artist's wife, Laurie.

David Ladmore Aspect of Craft: A Line Drawing

Ladmore starts with a refined line drawing on the watercolor paper: "It's helpful to put the minimum graphite on the paper as possible," advises Ladmore. "I usually use a hard 2H drafting pencil, and I do the sketch lightly so it's not going to muddy up the washes. Sometimes I use tracing paper or a sheet of Mylar just to make sure as few lines as possible are there. You know you're not actually painting a drawing; you're not working with pen and ink, so what you're doing when you put the drawing down is just establishing guidelines. There's so much to think about when you're actually in the midst of the painting that if the initial drawing is accurate, it definitely helps. Most of my painting is on a small scale, and I prefer hot-pressed paper because I like the way the paper responds to the colors: the colors appear brighter and are easier to remove. I tape the paper to a piece of Masonite. For the most part I work on a drafting table, although I sometimes work upright, looking back from a distance, so I can put in the finishing touches. It's important that the painted surface be at right angles to you, so you're not seeing it at an angle."



Color Sets the Tone

"I often think of the figure as cool in temperature," says Ladmore. "There's a tranquil delicacy in the flesh in a painting like Sargent's *Madame X*, where her flesh is that wonderfully pallid color. But what I see takes precedence. *James Bay Summer* (watercolor and pastel on paper, 20 x 26) has warm tones because the room that day was filled with effulgent light."



going to see the face of the creator in those lenses. And I think they must have hoped, with the invention of the telescope, that they would discover the world was like a terrarium in someone's hands. I'm very touched by that aspiration and consider myself an heiress to a lineage of peering at things and trying to know something by being with it and looking at it. In spite of my looking closely at things, a lot of what I do is not literal. When I'm working, it feels as if I'm taking dictation. I don't feel in control of all that I do. It's a trance-like state."

DAVID LADMORE Painting in Watercolor is a Performance Art

"I like to work from a combination of studio sketches and photographs," says Canadian painter and printmaker David Ladmore. "I may have to paint the thing half a dozen times or more, so I don't feel as though I can ask the model to lie still while I do it all over. Working in watercolor is like a rapid performance; it's not the slow, circumspect way of working that you have in oils. In watercolor I'm conscious of trying not to overwork the paper or belabor the initial impulse. I want the painting to seem effortless and economical so that it will get across an ethereal beauty. It's like a single performance on a musical instrument where you may have had to struggle away—practicing and