

## ART REVIEW

# At the ICA, 'A Place For Me' breathes new life into an old art form

A bold collection of 38 figurative works by eight artists poses a core question: Who gets to be portrayed in a painting, not to mention one that ends up being shown in a museum, and why?

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 12, 2022, 36 minutes ago



Celeste Rapone, "Spring Couple," 2021. NATHAN KEAY. © CELESTE RAPONE/IMAGE COURTESY CORBETT VS. DEMPSEY, CHICAGO.

If the scenes [on the cave walls at Lascaux, France](#) tell you anything, it's that people making pictures of things, and notably of each other, is an impulse almost as old as humanity itself. (The Lascaux pictures are 20,000 years old; homo

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/05/12/arts/ica-place-me-breathes-new-life-into-an-old-art-form/?event=event12>

sapiens — that's us — became the sole human species on the planet [somewhere between 15,000 and 40,000 years ago](#).)

So, "[A Place for Me: Figurative Painting Now](#)," recently opened at the Institute of Contemporary Art, is part of a very recent chapter in what's surely the most enduring artistic tradition in human history. Not that it's been without a few hiccups. Figurative work — paintings of family, friends, strangers, lovers, and the worlds they inhabit — found itself in the crosshairs of American art's signature moment in the 1940s and '50s, when [a cadre of painters calling themselves Abstract Expressionists](#) conquered the art world by rejecting representative painting entirely.

While the movement couldn't crush figuration permanently — as a species, depiction is nearly as much a biological imperative, I think, as sleeping or eating — it kept it sidelined, at least in the realm of "serious" art. In canonized circles, figure painting in the late 20th century endured as self-conscious irony ([Roy Lichtenstein's comic book paintings](#), say) or as grotesque contortions of classical form (anything by [John Currin](#)).



But narrative figuration has slow-burned its way back to the center of art discourse maybe because its first, very long dominant turn — centuries, really — left so much unsaid. Artists like [Kerry James Marshall](#) and [Henry Taylor](#) helped reinvigorate the field in the early 2000s by never abandoning it in the first place. More to the point, their devotion to their particular subject of Black American life helped highlight how much — and who — canonized figure painting had left out, and for how long. These days, figuration is all but dominant, with new-generation artists like [Kehinde Wiley](#) and [Amy Sherald](#) at the fore. And the form, long a tool for shoring up the authority of the ruling class, has been reconfigured as a means to empower everyone else.



David Antonio Cruz, "canyoustaywithmetonight\_causeyouarehere.youarehere,andweareherewithyou," 2021. MONIQUE MELOCHE GALLERY, CHICAGO. © DAVID ANTONIO CRUZ

What all that has to do with “A Place for Me” is nothing short of everything. With 38 recent paintings by eight artists, ICA curator Ruth Erickson poses a core question: Who merits portrayal in a painting — not to mention one that ends up being shown in a museum — and why? That’s been an easy answer for a good many decades in America, littered as it is with fawning portraits of the wealthy and powerful, and the countless hundreds of female nudes lining the walls of museums all over the country. No surprise, either, that they’re almost exclusively white.

I often think of “Mastry,” [the exhilarating survey](#) of Marshall’s life’s work in 2016-17, as a watershed moment, reclaiming a form relegated throughout history to the service of power. The artists in “A Place for Me” have vastly different techniques and aesthetic strategies, but they’re all progeny of that moment.

Art history abounds here, an inevitability, given how much of it there is with figure painting: Celeste Rapone’s vibrant distortions crackle with Cubist energies (Picasso, for all his fame during figuration’s dry period of the mid-to-late 20th century, never even entertained the idea of painting abstractly). Using everyday people and scenes, she makes the otherwise unnotable completely remarkable. “Spring Couple,” with its bulky, nearly nude male and female forms

otherwise unnotable completely remarkable. Spring Couple, with its bulky, nearly-nude male and female forms sprawled on the grass, made me think of “Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe” by Édouard Manet, whom Baudelaire once called [“the painter of modern life”](#) for his insistence on rendering ordinary scenes and subjects, not lives of privilege.



Louis Fratino, "My Meal," 2019. SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO., NEW YORK. © LOUIS FRATINO

Despite broad differences in technique, in aesthetic, even in form, the exhibition is bound by the common thread of undermining — or reassigning — the privilege of being depicted. David Antonio Cruz’s intimate domestic scenes of what he calls “chosen family” amid the queer communities of Boston and New York are tangles of people splayed on a divan, or on the floor, each matching the viewer’s gaze with their own — the watchers, being watched. Louis Fratino’s work often inserts queer culture into an old standard, the still life. His “My Meal,” a Matissean tablescape with a vertiginously compressed perspective of what appears to be breakfast, is scattered with handsome profile sketches and a drawing of a full-frontal male nude.

Ambera Wellman, whose one piece here is by far the most kinetic, technically unique, and unsettling, torques privilege

in an entirely different direction. After adopting a puppy during the pandemic, Wellman became acutely aware of the industrial scale of animal production for human use; her “Orbit,” a huge canvas inset with a frenetic scene of canine-human hybrids bleeding into each other, is a violent contortion of the usually cutesy narrative of “man’s best friend.” She shares a gallery with Doron Langberg, whose “Bather,” a male nude slumped in the tub amid an electrified field of fiery pink and orange, is an extreme update of [Pierre Bonnard](#)’s many paintings of his wife in the bath, most often adrift in a cool palette of aqua and green.



Aubrey Levinthal  
Shore Rain, 2021  
Oil on canvas  
Courtesy the artist and Monya Rowe Gallery, New York

Aubrey Levinthal, "Shore Rain," 2021. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MONYA ROWE GALLERY, NEW YORK

The exhibition is set up in pairs, some complimentary — Rapone and Fratino share space and synergies in their painterly name-checks of Picasso and Matisse — and some opposed. In the gallery that matches up [Arcmanoro Niles](#) with [Aubrey Levinthal](#), their extreme oppositeness, hot to cool, all but cancels the other out. Together, they make an important point: There is no right way to do this. Niles’s hyper-real self-portraits in patterned day-glo trousers, his face wreathed in hair and a beard of glittering pink, are a world away from the solemn, drab beauty of Levinthal’s many pieces here — of a worried couple crumpled into a blue IKEA-like sofa (“Shore Rain”), or “Barstools,” where a sickly yellow tone gives way to gray as a pair of sitters nestle up to a bar.

The show closes with a showcase of Cruz’s abundant gifts: a half-dozen paintings of makeshift family groups, vibrant

and shimmering, that both engage and subvert classical portraiture of nobility with their off-kilter compositions and defiance of conventional lineage. They pair up with paintings by Gisela McDaniel, whose portraits of “womxn” (a term she uses for inclusive identities) and nonbinary people of color are as collaborative with her subjects as she can reasonably make them. “Sunset Over 8 Mile” (McDaniel lives in Detroit), of a close friend, seats her subject, a musician and DJ with a serene gaze, in a low-slung lounge underneath a blazing sky. The canvas is draped with fabric and beads borrowed from the sitter; nearby, the subject’s voice plays in conversation with McDaniel — a component of her portrait practice generally — from a small sculptural stack of iridescent shells.

It resets an old imbalance — between patron and servant; between power and powerlessness — as communion, and representation as a compact based on mutual trust. As an amendment to a form as old as humanity, it’s hard to call it anything but new and improved.

### **A PLACE FOR ME: FIGURATIVE PAINTING NOW**

At the Institute of Contemporary Art, 25 Harbor Shore Drive, through Sept. 5. 617-478-3100, [www.icaboston.org](http://www.icaboston.org)

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