

FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING

What follows is a conversation that never happened. I talked to several artists and an art historian while gathering ideas for what I hoped would be a thoughtful essay about the use of figurative imagery in craft.



As I asked different people the same questions and compiled the answers I decided to forget the essay and defer to my sources. I have grouped their comments by topic and present them as a version of the imaginary conversation that began to rattle around in my head. —Robin Dreyer

Cast of Characters

Four are third session instructors: **Bob Trotman** is a woodworker and sculptor (see photo page 1). **Nick Cave** is a performance artist and the creator of fantastic garments (see photo page 1). **Paige Davis** is a jeweler and blacksmith. **Peter Gourfain** makes highly carved narrative sculptures in wood and clay. Penland Assistant Director **Dana Moore** is an artist who paints on photographs. **Jan Schall** is Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Florida.

Why do you use the figure as part of your work?

Bob Trotman: My work has evolved into figurative sculpture which has furniture references—drawers, boxes, flat surfaces. I see this as a way of teasing out the relationship between people and objects, between using and being used. We have a complex relationship with objects; we think of ourselves as separate from them, yet we often treat each other like objects. I found that combining the figure with furniture elements was a way of making this point.



Dana Moore, *Inappropriate Behavior*, oil on b & w photo

Paige Davis: I came to figurative work at a time when I was going through some emotional upheaval. I started doing more drawing and then I did a series of sculptures called the *Weather Women*—they were weathering the storms. I was trying to see if I could express physically what was happening to me emotionally.

Peter Gourfain: I'm looking for reasons to continue doing work that matters. I once took a group of students to see an exhibition of pre-Columbian pottery, and what I tried to explain to them was that these people had a very strong reason for doing what they did. They were part of a 1,000 year tradition. I am looking for a motivation that's as good as a cultural tradition. For me that's stories. I like to make beautiful things, but I need a reason to make them.

Dana Moore: It never occurred to me to do any other kind of work. These are the images that move me, that I am attracted to. How often do we have dreams without people in them? We personify everything; it's part of the way we understand the world. Even in the landscape there's an implied figure—us, the viewer.

Nick Cave: Objects that are worn on the body or used in some sort of ritual have always intrigued me, as objects as well as the function they serve. What I'm interested in is creating garments as points of departure. I use my body as a tool to work off of, or as an armature. But it's important to me that the work has a broader arena and can stand on its own without the body being present.

Is there a resurgence of figurative work today?

Jan Schall: Our modern era is fairly unique in its interest in abstraction. But it's so incredibly pluralistic right now that to try to discern directions like that might be contrived. I really think the boundary between abstraction and figurative work was crossed in the '70s. Performance work contributed to that because it was so body centered....You hear artists of that period talking about how terrified they were to insert the figure into their work. It seemed as if it had been done and didn't need to be done again. But it doesn't go away; we still live in our bodies.

Bob Trotman: What's clear is that the monolithic drive towards abstraction has ended. There may be a relative lack of direction, but the big things—the figure, landscape, abstraction—all need to be revisited from time to time.

Dana Moore: I think it's more than just some shift of focus in the art world. Figurative work is a way of reclaiming something human in an age of technology and electronic media. All of these things that attach us by brain separate us by body. There's always been figurative work, but it may have a different urgency now. Important subjects renew themselves in each new context.

Nick Cave: Figurative work has always been around, but I'd like to see more work that's really pushing the boundaries.

The figure is pretty literal so it's an access point for people to enter the work, but what I'm interested in is what it stands for beyond its literal format. Materials can provide an incredible amount of language, but what's often lacking is the ability to take it a step further. What's needed is work that deals with truth.

Paige Davis: I think folk art has inspired a lot of new figurative work. In its crudeness it has made people less intimidated about working with the figure.

Dana Moore: We have a visceral response to that work. It speaks to us on its own without entering the art realm.

Bob Trotman: Folk art has surely loosened people up. But it's worth remembering that the real stuff was not made by people who were conscious of themselves as folk artists. There were doing the best they knew how. We need to do that, too.

Does all the history attached to the figure make it intimidating to work with?

Bob Trotman: If one is too reverential and intimidated, one can't do anything. I want to do it because it gives me joy to grapple with the big stuff. But we don't have to compete with the past. What we need to do is make our own imperfect truth resonate as perfectly as possible.

Dana Moore: Artists who intentionally strive for originality are missing something. The comparison with what's come

before is inevitable, but it's also part of the dialogue. If they are responding to genuine, heartfelt issues, originality need not be a concern; it will take care of itself.



Peter Gourfain, detail of *Urn*; Ohio Series, carved terra cotta

What do you see as the value of a session like this in a craft school?

Paige Davis: It opens up many possibilities at Penland because there's so much exposure to other media. Also there will be a lot of students who don't have formal training and some pretty interesting work may come out of that.

Bob Trotman: It's a way of putting our manual skills at the service of ideas. People who are receiving craft instruction are mostly studying technique and materials, but if you don't address questions of art and design in a craft context you get work that may be good craft but bad art. Too often we get distracted by virtuosity. It becomes an elaborate sleight of hand that disguises the fact that the art is clichéd or the design is poor. People think that their hands will do it all for them, but they also need to use their eye and their mind.

Working with the figure has helped me quit thinking first about what my tools and materials could do and instead think of what I want to make and then find a way to get the tools and materials to do that.

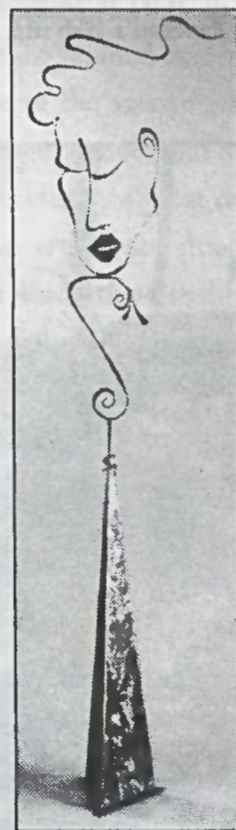
Nick Cave: The value of it is diversity, by which I mean individuals coming together from different backgrounds, different experiences, yet having this one element that is translated through everyone's work. We as humans are figurative so a collaborative foundation for this work is set up when we are in contact with each other.

Why is the figure so enduring, so universal?

Jan Schall: Because we're human. We're human beings and we feel lots of things and we experience them in our bodies. We have this capacity to reason and experience abstractly and that can be a transcendent or symbolic realm, but the realm of the figural is the comforting and enriching and infinitely interesting world in which we live.

Peter Gourfain: The figure is us. That's the answer. Every time you look in the mirror, every time you look at your friends. That's the reason, that's life. Then there's the opposite question: How could the figure be eliminated from visual art and that art have any relevance to the planet or the species?

Dana Moore: Everything we experience is filtered through our bodies. We're never loose from them. They define our space and even shape the qualities attributed to us. The stories of our lives can be told across our bodies. We read expressions and gestures that are infinitesimal. The body is a language and a map that we understand more thoroughly than anything else we encounter.



Paige Davis, *Weather or Not*, Steel, forged, welded

Tom Mills