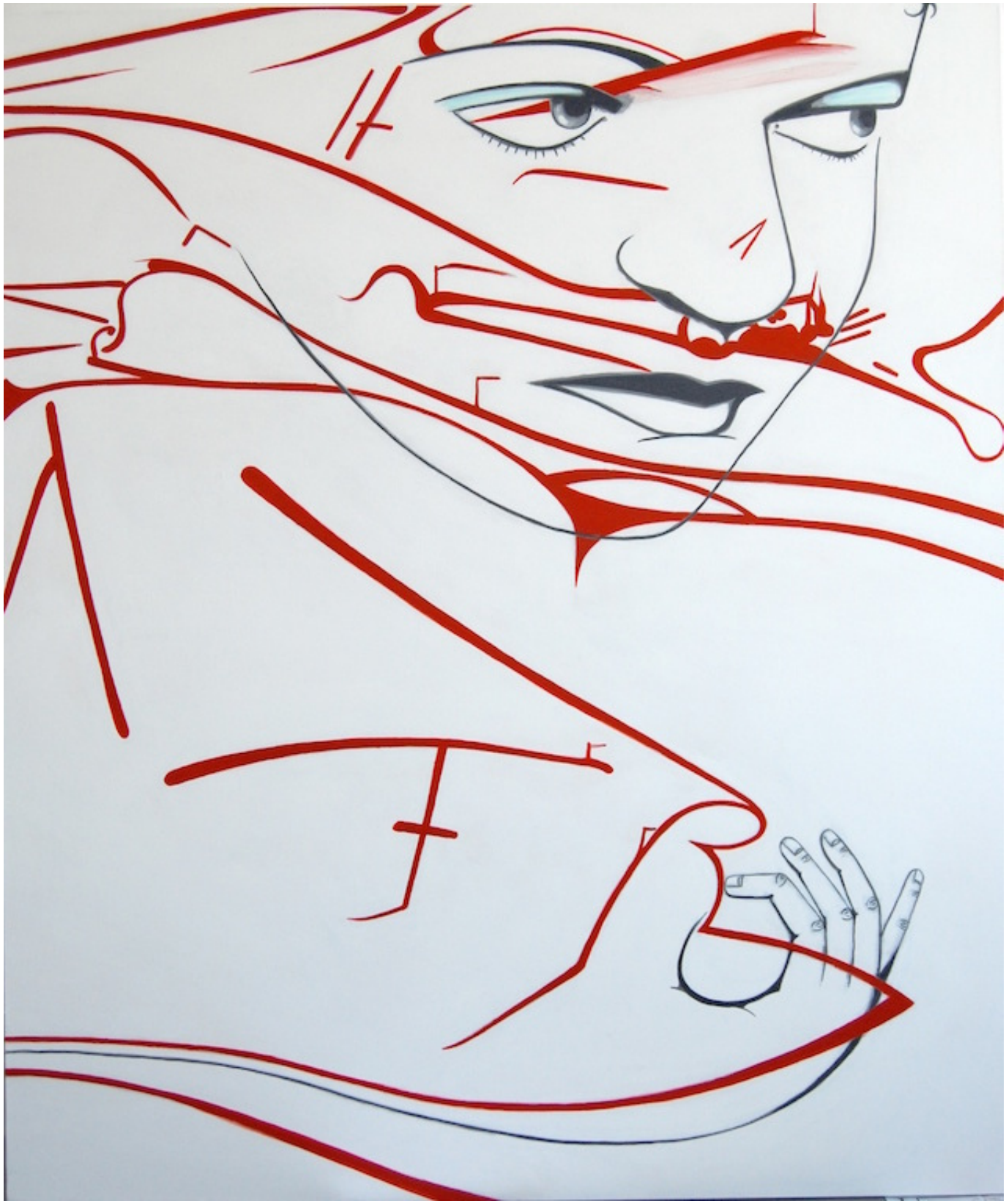
HYPERALLERGIC
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Beer with a Painter: David Humphrey

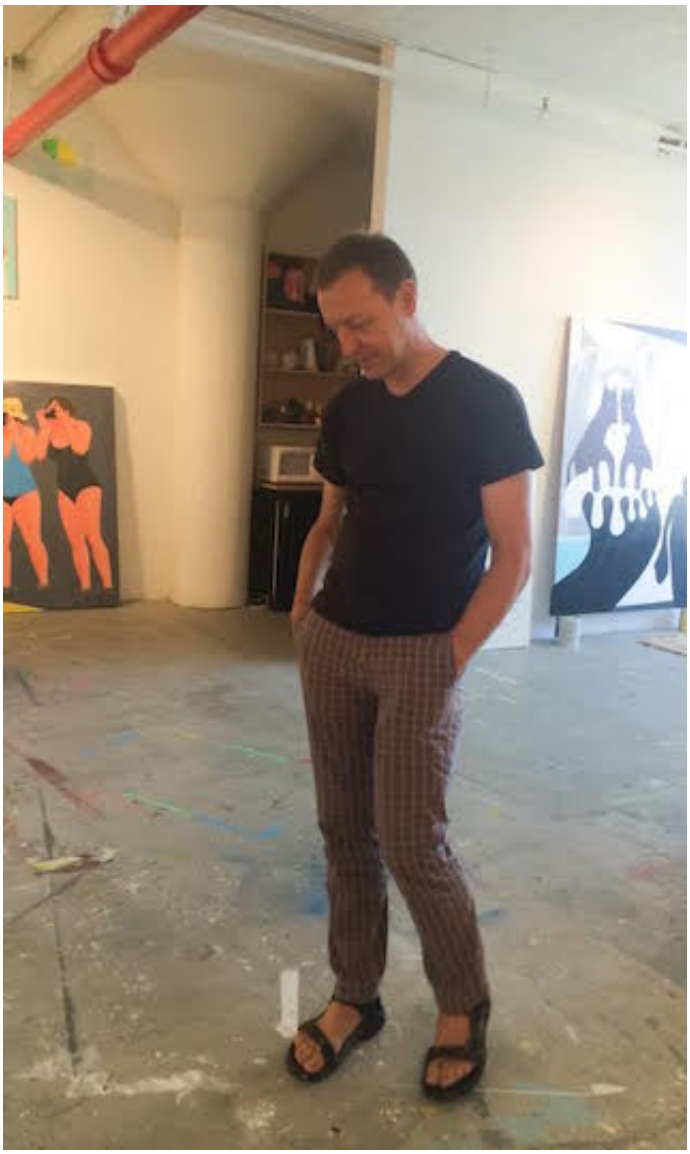
by Jennifer Samet on October 25, 2014



David Humphrey, “Intended” (2011-2014), acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches (all images courtesy of Fredericks & Freiser, NY, unless otherwise stated)

What I hoped to get from talking to **David Humphrey** were answers. The images in his paintings are zany, raunchy, and wild: a girl in a lawn chair holding monkeys by their scalps; a woman absent-mindedly marking another woman’s buttocks with daubs of paint; cats sitting beside slices of white bread partially spread with peanut butter. I wanted him to explain what it all meant.

We met in his Long Island City studio before the opening of his current exhibition at **Fredericks & Freiser Gallery**. At one point, I asked him about a word he had used, and he explained it was a “neologism.” It occurred to me that Humphrey relishes that: the need to create new language to describe what is nevertheless indescribable. He has been a prolific writer on art for decades, and in his own writing, he creates turns of phrase with words that are not usually combined, like “fizzy nimbus” and “tangled geodesics.”



David Humphrey in his studio, Long Island City, New York (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

His paintings and sculpture are similar: improbable juxtapositions of elements that touch. The couplings and connections are aspirational but unresolved. Highly specific characters — men and women, horses and pets — conspire with abstract, painterly passages. Humphrey’s work revels in these ambiguities, in the knowledge that there is always something impenetrable.

Humphrey was born in 1955 in Germany and lives in New York. An exhibition of his recent work is currently on view at Fredericks & Freiser. He has had solo exhibitions at the McKee Gallery and Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York; Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami; and the Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati. His work is in public collections including the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. He is

currently teaching in the MFA programs of Columbia and the University of Pennsylvania. An anthology of his art writing, titled ***Blind Handshake***, was published in 2010.

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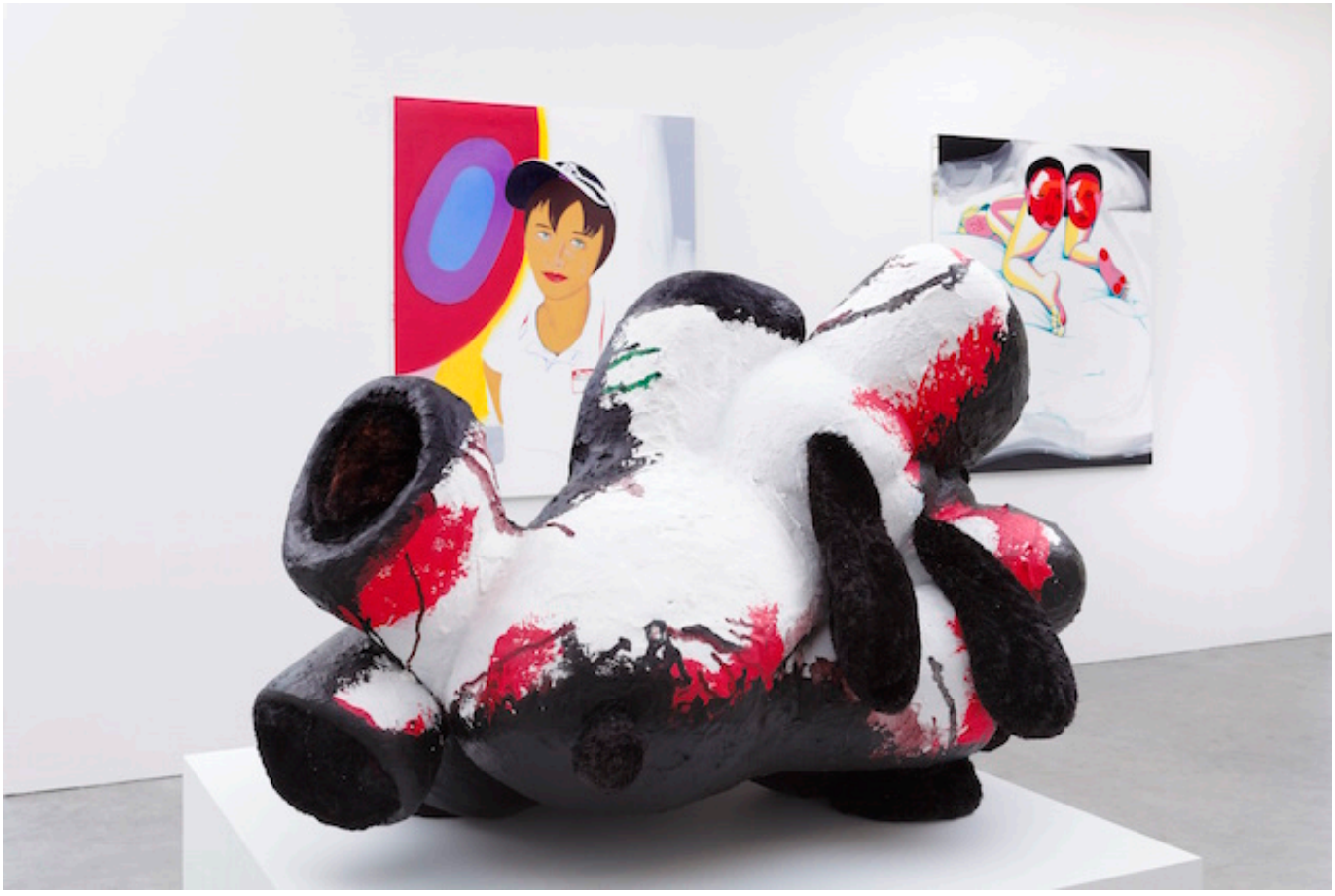
Jennifer Samet: *You grew up in Pittsburgh. What was your early exposure to art? Did you draw or make art as a child?*

David Humphrey: My father worked in advertising. He wasn't quite a Mad Man, but he was somewhere in that orbit, around mid-century. He was also a Sunday sculptor – a stone carver. He loved Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore, Arp and Brancusi, and he made smooth, simplified shapes. The one thing that my dad said — he didn't have an overly elaborated aesthetic theory — was that a sculpture needs to make sense from all sides. That is one of those ancient truisms that I still abide by.

I love the idea that the sculpture reveals itself in time as you move around it; that each movement you make reveals something else in the form, and that that becomes a narrative. Paintings are the same way, but there is the illusion that they reveal themselves at a glance. The image is an instantaneous thing, which then, as you move in relationship to it, or pay attention to different parts, unfolds.

My father had materials in the basement, so I made some sculptures as well. I took chicken wire and made shapes, dipped burlap into plaster, and covered the shapes. My fantasy is that they were like Franz West; they were modern art blobs.



David Humphrey, "Puppies" (2014), paper pulp, hydrocal, plush 24 x 36 x 28 inches

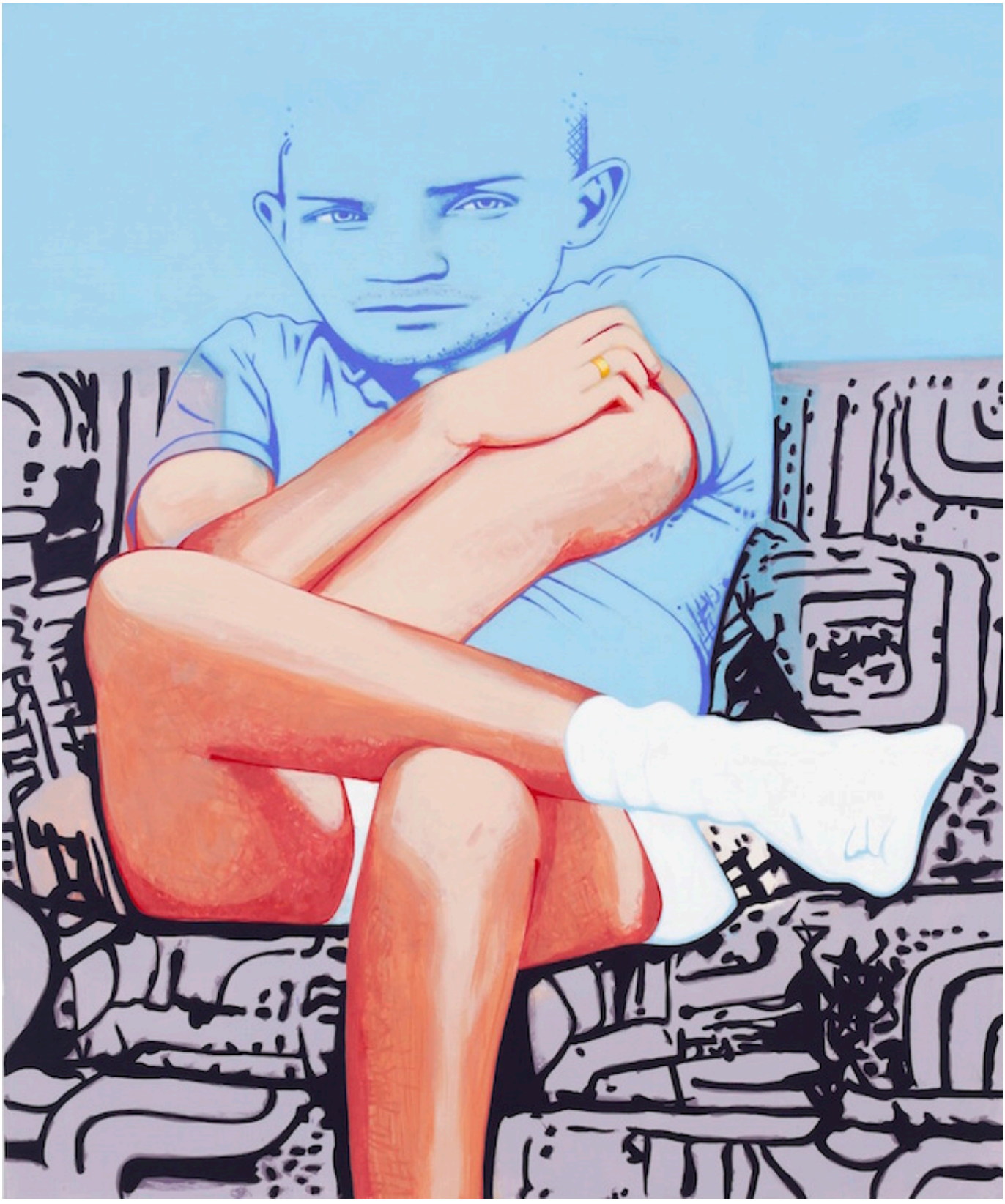
I always imagined I would be an artist but I didn't do much about it until I went to Maryland Institute College of Art. My greatest enthusiasm as a preteen and teenager was popular music, more than art. It seemed like everything that mattered was coming from music.

Song structure is a vernacular form, which delivers lyrics and tends to be idiomatic, generic. You have a three and a half minute song, a rhythm section, the verse, the chorus. Somehow the form is still turning out fresh material that speaks to people's deepest longings and anxieties. People make sense of it intuitively without thinking about the harmonic structure. In some ways, the equivalent is making a portrait, or a figure in a landscape. It is a picture of a person with a face sitting somewhere. And it may have some relationship to how the viewer is feeling.

JS: *You had a very complicated series of educational influences. After the Maryland Institute you studied at the New York Studio School. And after that, you got a Master's from New York University, where you studied film theory.*

DH: The New York Studio School interested me because I was fascinated by Philip Guston and the New York School. Guston was on the school's masthead, so I thought I could study with him. He never showed up. But it threw me into New York and into the Hans Hofmann tradition. I was carrying a lot of content baggage in my work at that time. I was also in love with Beckmann and Picasso.

At that time at the Studio School, the whole point was to move towards abstraction, and it planted an abstraction superego into me. I was also interested in plein-air painting. I thought plein-air painting was about the relationship between the body and the sensorium. There is a moment when you turn away from the tree and you look at your palette to apply it to the canvas and you're painting from memory. This opens the door to a more porous, open-ended, associative relationship to the subject. That was my argument to myself at the time: you aren't really painting from life; you are painting from memory.



David Humphrey, “On the Couch” (2014), acrylic on canvas 72 x 60 inches

I studied with Nicholas Carone and he had a metaphysical, Cubist-Surrealist ethos. Part of his unusual pedagogy was that he would become more evasive as you got closer to understanding him, introducing yet another fuzzy and peculiar layer. You would think that drawing a lot of orthogonal lines while standing in front of the nude was an analytic process. Then it emerged that it wasn’t really analytic, it was metaphysical. What did he mean by that? I never figured it out. It

created a set of anxieties and productive appetites. He had enough charisma to pull it off. He had lived through Cubism and Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, so he was connected to traditions that were all in books for me, as a young artist.

This was during the early days of Post Modernism but the Studio School would have nothing to do with that. When I went to New York University, critical theory was being translated and showing up in cinema studies. Identity politics and feminism became part of the language of contemporary art. Painting was being interrogated for its masculinist commodity status. For better or worse, it introduced a self-consciousness that put pressure on artists to account for themselves. Some artists became more pinched, and for others, it raised the stakes.

I felt that it was liberating. Painting could reflect what it was to be a person in contemporary life. You are going to the grocery store, buying things, thinking about your girlfriend, dreaming about other things. All of those layered contents could be addressed or reflected directly in the painting: the idea that the painting has the ability to reflect consciousness in a certain way — maybe in the way poetry can — in this peculiar language of colors arranged in a certain order.

JS: *What you speak about is a background that reflects a duality of abstraction and representation; it seems that this duality is constantly expressed in your work.*

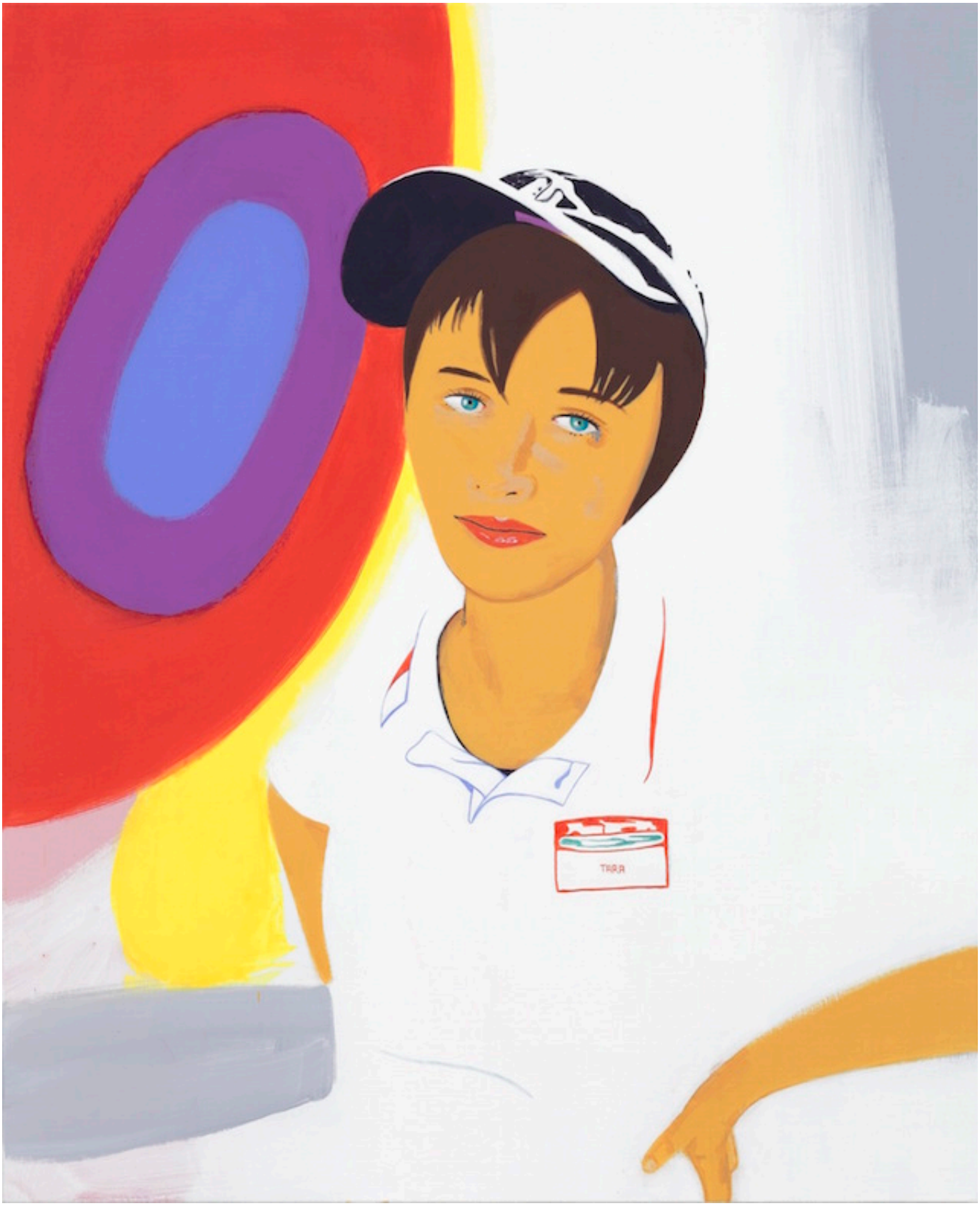
DH: I hope that there are a variety of languages – different pictorial languages that work with each other dynamically. They might strain the coherence of the thing, but they also become part of a theatrical narrative. I often set up situations in which I am performing in a collaborative relationship to some split-off part of myself. It might be an automatist gesture or photo-projection, and then I zoom out and try to find a way to reenter it.

I have been doing life drawing with a group of artists at Will Cotton's studio. I start with a translucent sheet on which I've done an abstract painting. Then I have to find a way to connect the figure to the abstraction. I thought the figure drawing sessions were a side activity – like going to the gym: improving your chops. But the modes I set up for myself turned into a model for constructing a painting: hybridizing semi- arbitrary abstract elements with normative representational features.

JS: *Your paintings are full of wild images. I wonder how you conceive of them and how they develop. Can you talk about this process?*

DH: Almost every painting has a complicated itinerary that is unique from the others. Sometimes a painting will be generated from a little sketch that I've developed in a bright responsible way with studies. Other times, the paintings take a lot of turns.

I planned to do a painting of a factory set-up and had a source image, but was looking to re-cast the characters. I trolled the Internet to find alternative workers. I found this image of a hipster guy with a hat and facial hair. He worked his way into the painting. But I kept thinking I didn't really do him justice, so he became a hybrid: the face and his body are from images of two different people.



David Humphrey, “Tara” (2014), acrylic on canvas, 54 x 44.5 inches

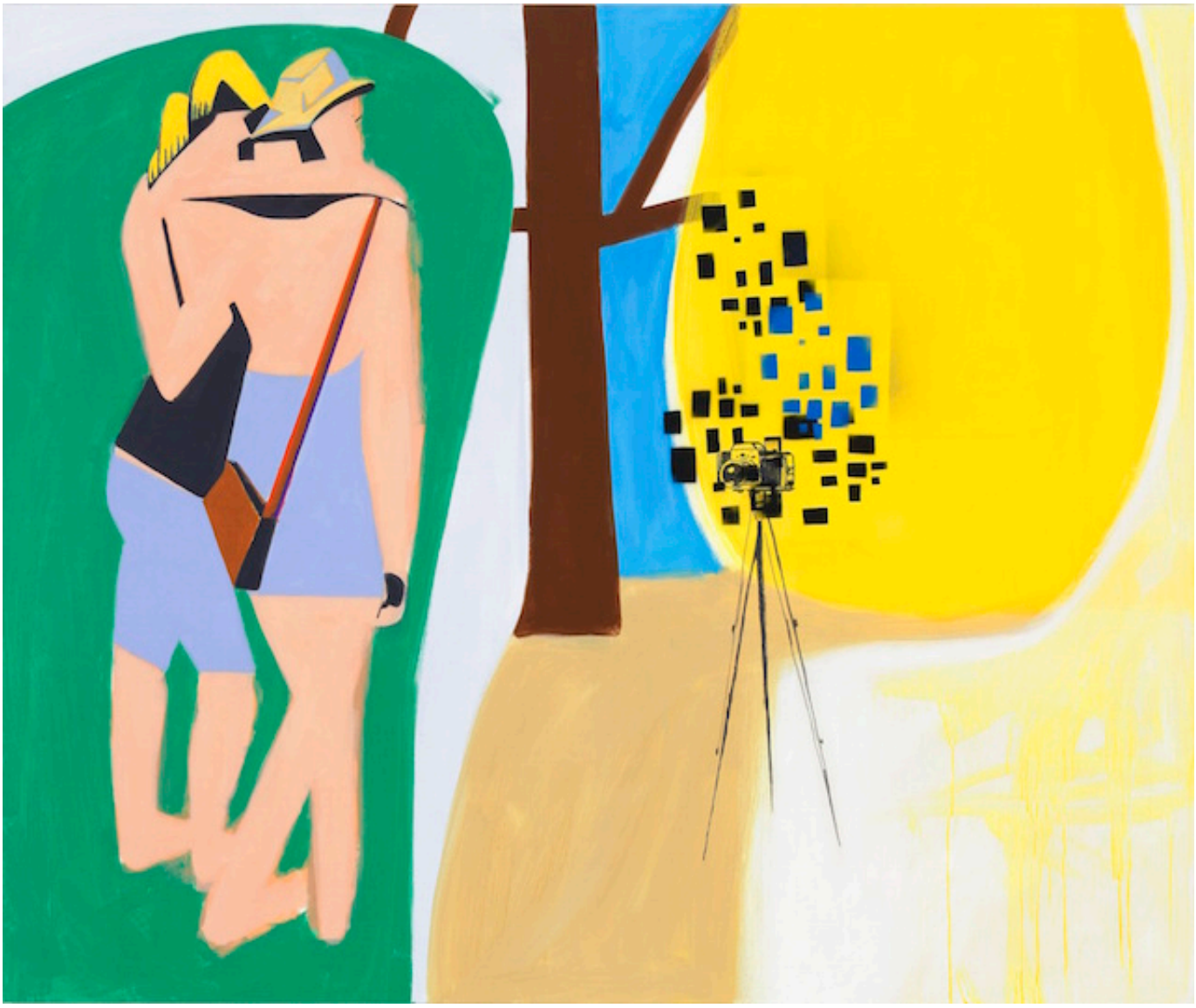
At some point, I decided that what was missing in the studio was a painting with a single protagonist: an old-fashioned portrait. So the character from the factory became the painting “On

the Couch” (2014), and then I felt like he needed a friend. I painted “Tara” (2014). She was the other worker. In some weird way, they walked out of one painting to have their own role in another. Maybe that was the idea of the factory painting: that a person could have a peculiar autonomy within a constrained role.

As I was working on “On the Couch”, there was a series of relays and developments. I traced the image from the Internet. Then I superimposed my tracing on other bodies. I did drawings of those tracings. I worked in Photoshop and stretched one face horizontally onto this other guy and printed that out. But I try to wipe my tracks. I don’t want the painting to be burdened by all this past.

At the same time, I like the patched-together quality. That is what it’s like to be a person in the world. We evolve out of dependencies and contexts. We are, in some ways, patch jobs: fragments that constitute a whole with some effort. There is an echo of that theme in the painting language, the means. I am always trying to pulverize the image. I like the idea that the painting is at risk of falling apart.

“Posing” (2014) shows two women with their arms around each other, posing for the photographer who was originally represented on the right. The photographer got eliminated and turned into floating atomized squares. In a way, the technology becomes the spectator, and might have even been set up by the women to take the picture. Digital representation is related to the ideas inherent in Post Impressionism and Divisionism: the image can be made of little units.



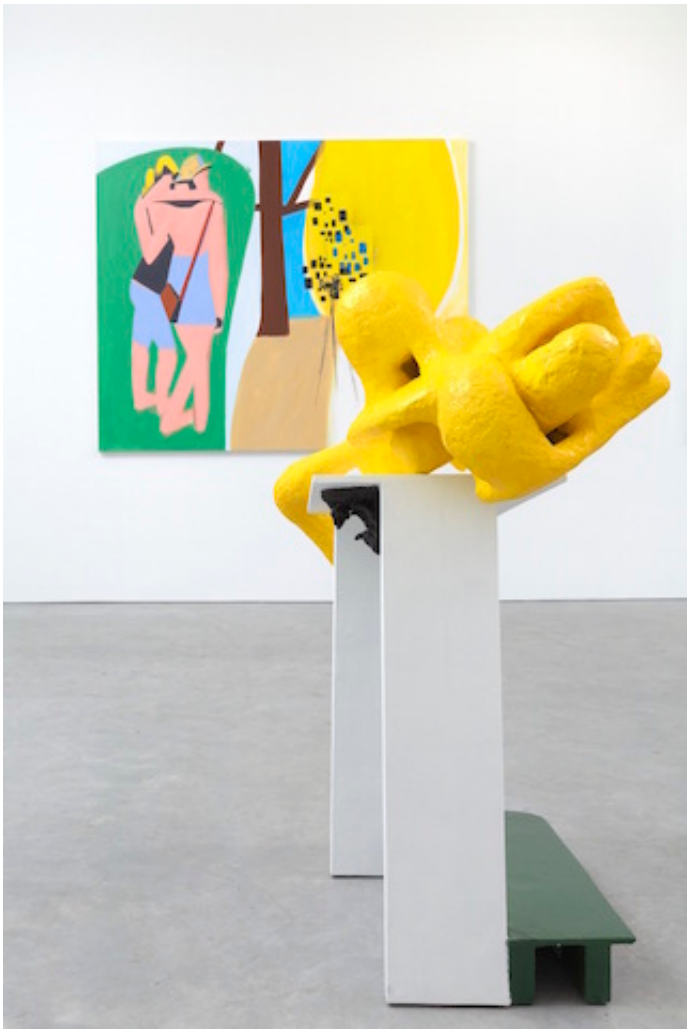
David Humphrey, “Posing” (2014), acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 inches

JS: *Is this related to the art historical idea that if the image is unfinished or made up of component parts, it is the viewer who puts it together?*

DH: I like the conceit of a dialogue between the spectator and the works that is more than just passive. In the 1980s, I made paintings that were awkward or that didn’t hang together. I was thinking that ideally spectators would have a vicarious relationship to it. They would have a sense of what it would be like to make the painting.

JS: *Your paintings often involve doubles, pairs, and you even explore interspecies relationships. What do these couples signify for you?*

DH: The dyad, or the pair, echoes the relationship between the spectator and the work, which is a proto-dyad. We are born into interdependency, thrown into the world as not quite singular. Our origins are blurred with others and we obtain singularity with great labor, and only partially.



David Humphrey, “Campfire” (2014), paper pulp, hydrocal, wood 46 x 48 x 22 inches

Interspecies relationships are a way to allegorize interpersonal relationships. Pets represent a desire to connect. Pets have always haunted the imagery in my paintings. In 2001, I was in a new relationship and happy about it, and my girlfriend was really into cats. I made a painting of two cats. I was also collecting cute ceramic figurines of animals. I thought I would crawl inside of a fantasy of what other people like, and then try to find my own tangled desires through that.

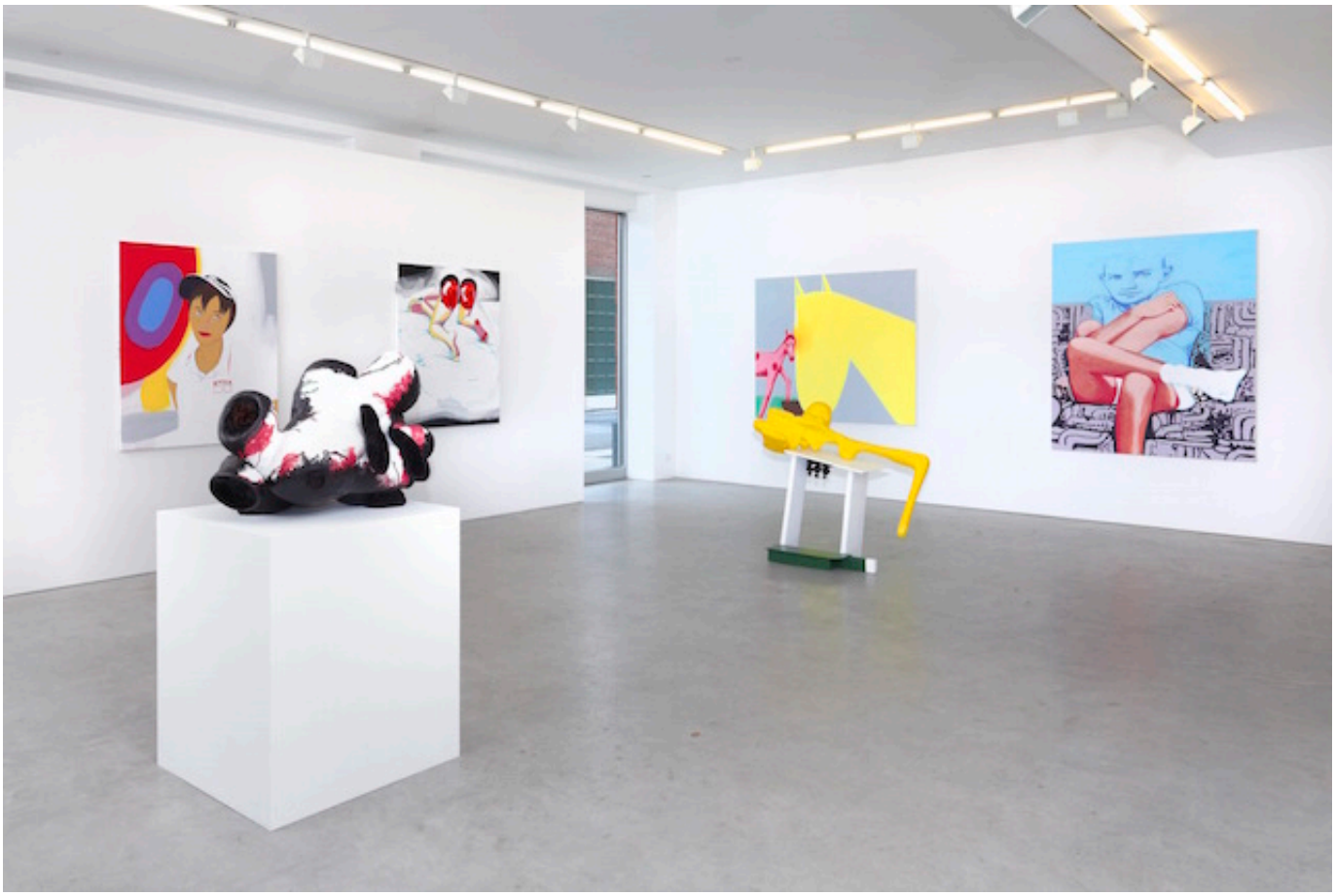
It was an early acrylic painting, and it felt really thrilling and dumb to me. I had this idea that it was a “normotic” painting; it was pathologically normal. Its specialness was accidental. It tried to be normal but it failed, and its failure was something special. A normotic painting is made with what I imagine is the intention of an amateur working from a family snapshot, that “I love my kid, and I am going to make a painting of my kid,” but something else creeps in, unbidden, that makes it very interesting and moving.

JS: *This makes me wonder about your feelings and connection to Pop Art. You have been connected to Surrealism, but I’m not sure about Pop Art.*

DH: When I first showed my work, I was labeled a Neo-Surrealist. Branding things as Neo was the thing to do in the early eighties. It was a micro-beat after Neo-Expressionism, and just before Neo-Conceptualism. But the whole time, I had an itch about Pop Art. I had a strong appetite to fold features of popular culture, mass culture, commodity culture into my imagery, but without the

detachment and coolness of Pop Art. I was interested in the possibility that there would be a way to articulate subjectivities in the language of the commodity.

An image creates a genealogy that speaks to other paintings and the history of other images, and tries to make a story out of that. I'd like to think that after thirty years of painting, those kinds of stories are unconscious. It is part of being a painter — it is partly a burden and partly an enrichment — that there is such a huge tradition of image-making.



Installation view of "David Humphrey: Work and Play" (2014) at Fredericks & Freiser, New York

The challenge is that the overwhelming tide of images on the Internet is shattering and complicating that other, pedigreed image repertoire. The Internet can count a random selfie as equivalent to a Rembrandt self-portrait. It equalizes images. We can't really stop it. I am living it and throwing my own paintings back into it by posting them on Facebook and Instagram. I posted a picture the other day, got a bunch of likes and that pleased me. But I'd like to think we can slow down the torrent of images and navigate it, by means of painting. To pause, select out what matters. I would like that to be a vital part of the paintings.

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