



Art

Why “Ugly” Paintings Are So Popular

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Installation view of “Ugly Painting,” at Nahmad Contemporary, 2023. Photo by Tom Powel Imaging.

© Tom Powel. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary.

The concept of beauty has long been a central tenet of Western art history. In classical art at least, beauty was viewed as a stand-in for the sacred. This traditional approach can be seen in paintings like [Michelangelo](#)’s Sistine Chapel ceiling, *The Creation of Adam* (1512), or *Sacred and Profane Love* (1513–14) by [Titian](#). Since the 20th century, however, many artists have sought to work with more “exploded” forms of painting—styles that disrupt figuration, and challenge or distort our perception of reality. These paintings are often characterized by their jarring, unnatural colors, warped figures, and unsettling subject matter; they are paintings more concerned with aesthetic provocation, and, as such, with ugliness rather than beauty. At New York–based gallery Nahmad Contemporary, a new exhibition is putting ugliness into perspective. “Ugly Painting,” on view through August 26th, curated by Eleanor Cayre and Dean Kissick, celebrates painters like [Richard Prince](#), [Carroll Dunham](#), and [Nicole Eisenman](#), among others, who make deliberate use of garish, grotesque styles of brushwork, figuration, or composition across their work. For example, in [Rita Ackermann](#)’s *Dos and Dents Nurses (United)* (2009), shadowy forms of people swirl together, creating an amorphous blob of bodies drenched in brown, red, yellow, and black: an unsightly, yet evocative color

combination. Elsewhere, Connor Marie's *Pork* (2023) portrays a young woman with a presumably dead pig, with their faces reflected in the surface of the water next to them. Marie's brushstrokes are incredibly soft, rendering the image with an eerie, smooth finish as if computer-generated, gesturing to technology's capacity to create uncanny images.



Connor Marie, *Pork*, 2023. © Connor Marie. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary.

Given their rejection of the values prized in the Western art canon, ugly paintings challenge our assumptions about what is considered “good” art. “Bad painting and ugly painting are often conflated...but they aren’t the same,” wrote Rachel Wetzler in *Art in America*. [Jana Euler](#), therefore, “does not make bad paintings, but she does, more often than not, make ugly ones,” she wrote.

In fact, bad paintings themselves found a place in art history in the 1978 exhibition at the [New Museum](#) titled “Bad Painting,” curated by the museum’s founder, Marcia Tucker. That exhibition featured figurative artists like [James Albertson](#), [Joan Brown](#), [Charles Garabedian](#), and [William Wegman](#). For instance, Garabedian’s work at the time of exhibition exemplified “bad painting,” in its use of color, and flat figurative style that intentionally evokes childlike scribbles.

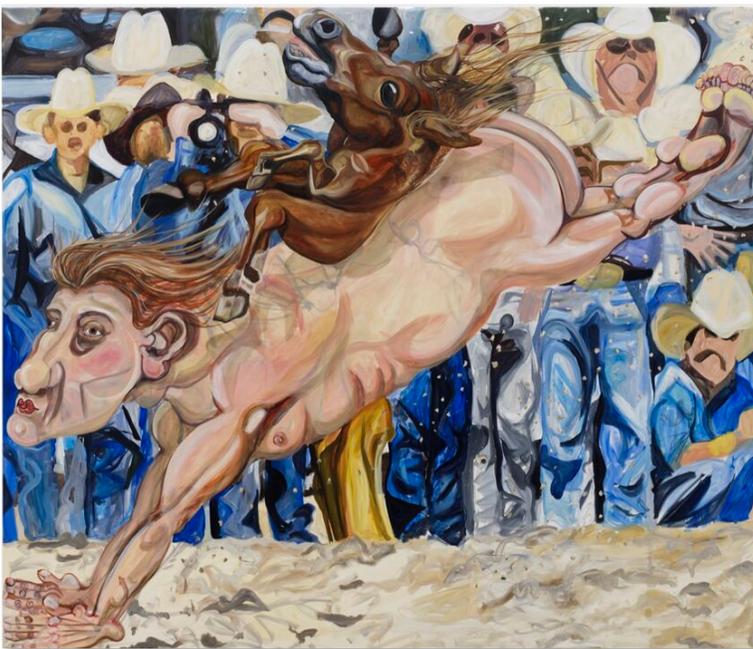


Installation view of “Ugly Painting,” at Nahmad Contemporary, 2023. Photo by Tom Powel Imaging. © Tom Powel. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary.

“Bad Painting” emerged at a time when painterly aesthetics were pushing the boundaries of “beauty.” Artists had begun to reject the normative classical style in the art world through movements like [Pop Art](#) and [Abstract Expressionism](#). In those artists’ works, a grotesque aesthetic, also emerging in performance art and [Viennese Actionism](#), was commenting on the state of the world and its politics by examining its ugliness through painting.

Today, the concept of “bad painting” seems inadequate to define the work of contemporary artists, explained “Ugly Painting” co-curator Dean Kissick in an interview with Artsy. “The idea of bad painting doesn’t really make sense anymore, as most contemporary paintings would fit into [Tucker’s] bad painting show—most contemporary paintings break with convention and taste in some way.”

And yet, the idea of ugliness in relation to painting still holds sway. After all, as Kissick noted, overall society has a “complicated relationship” to beauty. “The idea of beauty in art is a provocative concept—[it] can be associated with conservatism, elitism, and reactionary ideas about art.” There is something comforting, therefore, about an ugly painting—it can speak more honestly about how we’re feeling and the time period we’re living in.



Jana Euler, *rider/horse switch under observation ride thrown off*, 2018. © Jana Euler. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary.

Perhaps this is why ugly paintings are still so popular. For example, in “Ugly Painting,” works by Euler and [George Condo](#) are aggressively bold with their composition and color use, confronting viewers through their warped use of figuration: a view of reality through a funhouse mirror. Both are sought out by collectors because of their distinctive styles but their paintings don’t convey the beauty or “pleasing” aesthetics of either the classical art of the past, nor of Pop Art and Ab-Ex before them. In 1951, for example, *Vogue* chose to photograph that season’s fashions in front of [Jackson Pollock](#), thereby associating his gestural painting style with beauty and chic style. The ugly paintings of today don’t seem to have the same crossover appeal.

While we can theorize the value of an ugly painting, inevitably there are real artists behind these works: How do the creators of paintings labeled as “ugly” react to this definition? Not all artists featured in the exhibition have the recognition and status as Euler and Condo do, after all. Owning this description is a choice.



Theresa Chromati, *Exhale Explorer (Woman and Scrotum Flowers Continue to Stretch Together)*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.

Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2023. © Josh Smith. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner.

For instance, [Theresa Chromati](#)'s abstract painting *Exhale Explorer (Woman and Scrotum Flowers Continue to Stretch Together)* (2023) is easily one of the most beautiful works on view. The work merges figurative lines and forms to create an explosive array of abstracted shapes in shockingly bright yellows, reds, greens, and turquoise. Chromati was initially ambivalent about being included in the exhibition. While the artist resonated with some ideas present in the show, such as a grotesque style, and experimentation with figuration, she was nonetheless unsure about how the title would affect the perception of her work. As Kissick explained, “The artist wanted to be sure that the rationale was honest and not just a spectacle.”

The reception to the exhibition has been overall positive, according to Kissick, and no one, as of yet, seems put off by the premise. “Ugly Painting” asks audiences to reconsider their taste, suggesting that there is beauty even in these paintings that appear ugly at first glance. “We are not suggesting that they are bad works—we are playing with aesthetics of taste,” Kissick said. This spills over into what buyers want to collect, he suggested: When it comes to owning work, it’s not just about having something pretty to look at. “A collector just wants a good painting, and a good painting doesn’t have to be beautiful.”

So, why ugliness now? As Kissick so aptly put it, “It’s a weird time. We’re surrounded by ugly and tasteless aesthetics.” If an artist’s work is a reflection of their experiences in the world, inevitably, the work’s aesthetics will match that reality. Simply put, we live in ugly times. Ugly paintings can offer us a way to confront this ugliness and find beauty in it.

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