

# THE FIGURATIVE AND FIGURAL MEMBRANE

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“And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened.”

– Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII, 513a



Aboriginal cave paintings at Injalak Hill  
at Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) in West Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia.

Contemporary painting is a territory; it is a vast expanse of uneven and incoherent terrain, which is continuously transformed by the hands of artists en masse. Like any geography, contemporary painting, taken as a whole, is radically diverse in its features and in a state of constant flux. Features within this notional geography, however, differ from terrestrial geography because they are exclusively formed and unformed by human activity. While the territory of painting is principally a microgeography because of these qualities, it also indexes larger cultural and civilizational forces.

Within the terrain of contemporary painting there are gaping holes of historical amnesia and deep wells of nostalgia in the form of historical pastiche. The voids of historical amnesia are always framed by forms of nostalgia. Ignorance of the past always produces, paradoxically, a blind fetishization of it. So these two features of the landscape of contemporary painting are always found in close relation to one another.

However, not all of the features of this landscape reflect our simultaneous obsession with and ignorance of the past. Some formations are directed more towards futurity, oftentimes as a menacing horizon of civilizational collapse and planetary death or, conversely, as a sublime peak of post-human consciousness. Here, artists' utopian and dystopian fantasies are driven by the bombast of technological revolution.

Of the almost infinite sites one could choose to explore within this territory, I would like to meditate on these two exaggerated zones of activity: on the one hand, forms of historical imagination in relation to amnesia and nostalgia, and on the other, forms of futurity in relation to the apocalyptic and the transcendental. In order to ground this allegory, the exploration of these landscapes will be done through the concept and representation of the figure.

The figure in the landscape of contemporary painting is best and most succinctly understood through the modality of the *figurative* (i.e., through resemblances and reflections; in short, the representation of the human body as we experience it perceptually in the material world). However, the figure can also appear more allusively as the *figural*, shifting away from resemblance and reflection toward the realm of concepts and forms. Form, here, does not refer to the material sense per se but more to the Platonic vein of a higher dimension of pure ideational space.

The figurative painter is likely to paint people and in doing so, to charm us with our own reflection manifest on the surface of the image as a constellation of pigment; a kind of microgeography through which the absorption and transmission of photons reveal us as we are, as we were, or as the artist wants us to be. However, it is almost impossible to know what the figural painter may paint because all of the references to the material world contained in figural works are somehow shifted and partially untethered from their referents—in a word, transfigured. This shift is not metaphysically absolute, like a messiah, but more aspirationally directed toward a new aesthetic experience. The figural painter simultaneously desires to reveal new concepts through new forms and, conversely, new forms from new concepts. Because of these tendencies, figurative painters are often preoccupied with the history of painting and its traditional forms of representation, or lack of representation. In contrast, figural painters are more directed toward futurity through the hysteria of technological development. This is because technology has the ability to reshape the world and, perhaps more significantly, our relationship to it, giving rise to new forms of knowing and being.

At this moment in the territory of contemporary painting, the features of amnesia, nostalgia, the apocalyptic, and the transcendental



Dust Muhammad, *The Story Of Haftvad And The Worm*,  
Folio From The Shahnama Of Shah Tahmasp, ca. 1540. Sadruddin Aga khan Collection.

are being radically reshaped by a dominant civilizational force: the ascendance of artificial intelligence (AI). While it is often the case that figurative and figural painters are oppositional to one another within the landscape of contemporary painting (towards the past and future, respectively), the emergence of AI poses an existential crisis for both. Because of this, the figurative painter must reckon with the material body as something that was once central to identity but may soon only function as a form of frailty and finitude that is eclipsed by a post-human, post-body form of being in the world. For the figurative artist to succeed in restating the importance of the physical body, they must simultaneously avoid historical amnesia and overcome the lure of nostalgia as a reactionary retreat from an inhospitable present. In contrast, the figural painter's task may be to question whether truly novel and meaningful forms can be produced from the fervor of technological advancement. In doing so, the figural painter must synthesize both the apocalyptic (dystopian) and transcendent (utopian) hyperbolizing of this frontier of civilizational transformation.

Although both the figurative and figural can provoke real and profound questions about larger civilizational upheaval, especially in relationship to AI, they are nevertheless limited by their respective myopias. After all, the utilization of novel technological processes does not, in itself, make a compelling work of art. Nor does the restaging of historically significant painting styles populated with contemporary subjects mean that history has been bridged successfully or succinctly.

Just as the Futurists—whose beautiful and now clearly naive manifesto was published in 1909—spoke poetically about the rise of machines and valorized upheaval and violence, so too will the ubiquity of *cyborgenic* aesthetics in contemporary painting be viewed in retrospect as more fantasy-based than anything else. Similarly, contemporary figurative works that deploy historical pastiche in styles, from Picasso to Ingres, will likely be seen as regressive and willfully ignorant of both the past and present in the coming years.

However, common ground does exist, as much between the features of these respective landscapes as between the figures who inhabit them, be they figurative or figural. Although I would argue that AI is more figural than figurative, because it refers to a whole constellation of ontological and epistemological concepts, it nevertheless casts into sharp relief the importance of the material body. Today's figurative painters will likely be highly relevant to the coming excesses of cybernetic hysteria and deathlessness should they come to pass. Whether *figurative* or *figural*, both forms will perish in an unchecked accelerationist orgasm of global economic abstraction; there will be no concepts and no bodies on a space station orbiting a dead Earth, which is busy mining cryptocurrencies until the Sun engulfs it in a supernova.

While both terms are useful, the need for a third is implicit in this notional dyad of painterly disposition. The third term must synthesize the literal and material qualities of the body with the aspirational and speculative realm of concepts in order to stand against the evacuating power of AI. This term must be malleable, resilient, entirely porous, and totally delimited.

In searching for a synthesis of the figurative and figural, one must recall painting's unique powers as a primitive form of cultural technology that perhaps best expresses our collective intelligence for compression (compression as in collapse and conflation of both the feeling of spaces and, reciprocally, the space of feelings). Any glance at painting, transculturally or transhistorically, reveals this prodigious capacity. Whether it be the methodical and hypnotic paintings of the Aboriginal Dreamtime or the dense geometric space of Persian miniatures, a profound collapse of experience is

condensed and assembled on the surface as both a figurative and figural microgeography. Painting's sensitivity (its ability to catch and restructure experience) is analogous to our largest and most outwardly facing organ, the skin. The third term could then be called *membrane*, because it is biological (figurative) but also conceptual (figural).

In order to explore the third term, membrane, we will need to borrow some of the maniacal powers of AI to appreciate its potential scope. While new algorithmic forms are constantly emerging from the frontiers of computer science as they relate to the mass culling and reconfiguration of information, their current manifestations fall short of profound aesthetic experience. For instance, Google's Deep Dream is a computer vision program that uses a convolutional neural network to find and enhance patterns in images. However, it ultimately produces things that look less interesting than the average psychedelic ephemera we've had laying around since the 1960s. Similarly, DALL-E mini is a meme generator that draws on statistical patterns gathered from thirty million labeled images to extract connections between words and pixels, but the result is essentially collage for those too lazy to draw. That being said, the process of image creation with these soft forms of AI is profoundly interesting, while the result is predictably banal. In an appreciation for the process and scope of machine learning, we would do well to imitate AI in our own limited way when we try to conceptualize complex things, such as the landscape of painting.

In imagining painting as the most skin-like of our civilizational products in its totality, I invite you to conjure a fantastical topology made from every single painting on Earth formed into a massive membrane, which is like a Möbius loop folding back onto itself infinitely. If we were to walk on its surface and gaze down upon it, we'd wonder if it was the most intricate map ever created or an actual territory made manifest by millions of hands pushing trillions of molecules of pigment into hyper-specific geographic formations. Simultaneously, this speculative territory feels us and is felt by us as a sensory organ of incomprehensible scale. This is because the informational matrix of the membrane, like the skin of our bodies, functions as a vast network of exchange and transformation (exchange in the form of sensory data [perception] and transformation in the sense of metabolic activity [conceptualization]). Yet, as skin-like as the painting membrane appears, it is only so in a figural way—as a complex organ through which a tenuous inside and outside is maintained.

Because painting is so vast that we will never fully trace its contours, we will never come to know the shape of its body—and this is to the benefit of the medium and its practitioners. As we make the imperceptible turn on the grand Möbius of painting, we do so continuously without passing from an outside to an inside, and yet, paradoxically, the membrane of painting insists that we do precisely this. All of our terms, like speculative objects in a Möbius world, can spontaneously change their orientedness. A lefthanded glove need only be carried along the surface in order for it to become a righthanded glove. In gleaning this feature of our topology-of-all-paintings, we can observe the spontaneous change in the orientations of our concepts and forms: amnesia becomes nostalgia, the apocalyptic becomes transcendent, and the figurative becomes figural. I would argue that this spontaneous reorientation of terms is only meaningful if it is precisely observed and recorded back into the *material* and *ideo-membrane* of painting both *figuratively* and *figurally*.



Mosaic from a Roman Villa in Sentinum  
(present day Italy)  
depicting Aion holding a Möbius strip, ca. 200–250 CE.