

BACK TO *Nature*

Exploring the connection of the human figure and the environment in art through the ages. By John O'Hern



When John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) grew tired of producing oil portraits of the cosseted and corseted he would escape to the mountains of Europe to paint watercolors of the freely rushing water of mountain streams. The spontaneity and experimentation in his watercolors echoes the energy and freedom he saw in nature. Although photographs and other paintings from the time show him and his entourage buttoned up and laced in, *Mountain Stream* (circa 1912 to 1914) depicts a nude bather enjoying the refreshing water and embodying a *joie de vivre* that would quickly end with the outbreak of the World War I in the summer of 1914.

The idea of the nude in nature takes us back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden experiencing an innocence and a oneness with the environment. The primal energy of the feminine and the masculine has inspired artists for ages.

Nancy Depew paints the subtleties of light and color in lush forest scenes but is more drawn to the female nude and flowers. "I feel that the flowers each have a unique voice and that the juxtaposition to the human form emphasizes a recurring theme in my work, that we are not separate from nature, but part of it, inextricably linked to it," she says. Often, her figures appear weightless in their field of flowers as if they have transcended the corporeal. Her painting

1
John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), *Mountain Stream* (ca. 1912-14), watercolor and graphite on off-white wove paper, 13 3/4 x 21". Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1915.

2
Nancy Depew, *Insight*, oil on canvas, 36 x 26". Courtesy the artist and Haynes Galleries, Nashville, Tennessee, and Thomaston, Maine.





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Insight (2014) depicts a figure among a background of lilies—budding, blossoming and fading. White lilies are symbolic of purity and were thought by the ancient Greeks to have come from the milk of Hera, the wife of Zeus and queen of the gods. Depew's figure welcomes the light, reflecting and absorbing it.

Flowers with more ominous associations appear in the painting *The Night and Her Two Sons* (2011) by Carlos Barahona Possollo. The sons of Night are Hypnos and Thanatos—Sleep and Death—who are “very closely connected,” the artist observes. “Death is so many times the danger that lurks in the dark when we trespass the normal limits of Sleep.” The pendulous blossoms of the brugmansia in the background are the source of scopolamine, known as the “Devil’s

Drug.” The poppies in the foreground are the source of opium. “Both induce the crossing of fundamental thresholds, with huge risks for the consumer,” Possollo explains. “The seriousness of this issue is well placed in the hands of gods such as these—the purple cloth infers a sacred setting.”

Patricia Watwood depicts the nude goddess Venus in repose, a motif introduced by Giorgione in the early 16th century. Giorgione died of the plague in 1510 before he could complete his *Sleeping Venus*, foreshadowing the situation Watwood’s Venus finds herself in.

Watwood observes, “I am not so much interested in women as a subject as I am in women as a presence. I’m not trying to create an object so much as a force.” Venus was a primal force to the Greeks

3
Patricia Watwood, *Sleeping Venus*, oil on canvas, 40 x 40". Courtesy the artist and John Pence Gallery, San Francisco, California.

4
F. Scott Hess, *Lift*, oil and egg tempera on aluminum panel, 39 x 32". Courtesy Koplin Del Rio Gallery, Culver City, California.

5
Carlos Barahona Possollo, *The Night and Her Two Sons*, oil on canvas, 30 x 71". Courtesy the artist.



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and was their goddess of beauty, love and fertility. In Watwood's *Sleeping Venus* (2013), a canary gazes at the goddess from a dead branch among electronic trash. Like the canary taken into mines to test the air it is, for now, still alive and Venus, herself, remains robust in her decaying surroundings. The painting's frame is covered with various currencies and circuit boards, further intrusions into a pristine, natural world. Watwood writes, "The beauty of the earth should inspire people to protect it, but humans are fatally anthropocentric."

Lift (2014) by F. Scott Hess is mythocentric. Two nude couples, including the artist, raise up an enormous, mysterious skull, in reverence and adoration. Reverence for science and evolution?

Cultish reverence for the different because it's different? Is the blue butterfly on the hair of one of the women a talisman or a living one, in either case symbolic of rebirth? Hess seldom gives answers. "I like to leave things open," he says. Donald Kuspit writes, however, "Hess uses profane realism to represent the sacred moments of life, for he knows we live in a profane world with little or no sense of the sacred, let alone of the sacredness of art."

In *Lift*, his technical knowledge results in convincing figures as well as an ethereal glow which, in this case, is a result of his using both egg tempera and oil and painting on an aluminum panel.

The nude and nature will always be subjects in art as artists recall our cultural heritage and contemplate our uncertain future.