

**The New Quotidians: Maud Madsen at 1969 Gallery**



*Maud Madsen, Opening Night, 2020, acrylic on panel, 60 x 35 in.*

**Maud Madsen:** *3 paintings* | [1969 Gallery](#) | March 11 through April 24, 2021

**By DANIEL MAIDMAN,** April 2021

I've been following Maud Madsen's work for a few years now, and her show *3 paintings* at 1969 Gallery seems like a good occasion to begin relating her work to the broader current of contemporary art and art history.

The three paintings, hearkening back to adolescence, remind me of a strong impression from my own adolescence – a phrase from a book: “The *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* has outsold the *Encyclopedia Galactica* because it is slightly cheaper, and because it has the words 'DON'T PANIC' in large, friendly letters on the cover.”

Madsen paints large, friendly paintings that grab the viewer roughly by the arm and cheerfully instruct us not to panic. She wades right on in to the topic of body anxiety: her subjects are young women with big, squishy bodies, dressed somewhat unfashionably. She gleefully foregrounds cellulite in the butt, the thighs, the knees. Her figures take up most of the canvas, a framing which one senses they find slightly mortifying. The narratives in the paintings indicate the discontent and discomfort of young women who don't like the way they look, and yet cannot hide and won't stop living. With the bright colors and big happy sizes of the paintings themselves, Madsen assures her characters – and us – *don't panic*. It's not as bad as you think it is. It will be OK.

This is awfully charismatic. It was what drew me to her work from the start.

In a broader context, I would like to describe her work as being part of a small movement. I don't know what you'd call its practitioners – perhaps The New Quotidians. I'm thinking especially of Danica Lundy and Louis Fratino.

Like Madsen, Lundy focuses on the intensities and awkwardnesses of adolescence. Fratino mainly paints interiors, depicting adult domestic life. These three painters all take a staunchly anti-glamorous approach to their subjects. Communicative, close observation of the most telling details of everyday experience is the coin of their realm.



Maud

*Madsen, Low-Hanging Fruit, 2020, acrylic on linen, 78 x 58 in.*

In Madsen's *Low-Hanging Fruit*, the main figure hangs upside-down from monkey bars. The viewer is positioned above her, precisely so that we can see the bottoms of her breasts - her shirt is about to fall down around her shoulders. Her body is nearly mature. But looking more closely, we see she is wearing looped jelly bracelets on her right wrist. With this essential detail, Madsen tells us that the character in this painting is still

childish. She's not out to seduce us, she's just innocent. Madsen catches here a particular moment along the winding road to adulthood.



*Danica Lundy, Sharpener, 2019, oil on panel, 8 x 10 in.*

Parallel this with Lundy's *Sharpener*, in which Lundy lovingly paints the structure of a schoolroom pencil sharpener, the kind you used to have to go to the back of the room to use during class because it was bolted to a table. The viewer is positioned as the user of the sharpener: our hands sharpen our pencil. And technically, we are looking down at the sharpener. But within our view is the pigtail of the girl in the back row, and the face of the bored girl one row over who seems to be whispering with her. We're sneaking a look at pretty girls from our unseen vantage at the back of the room. And now that you notice it, the cover of the sharpener is missing, so that the pencil, tightly gripped in the hand, is unrolling a long white pencil shaving all over the sharpener's table. This invention ingeniously stylizes a common memory into a symbolic narrative of adolescent lust. As in the case of Madsen, Lundy has caught the everyday, especially the dynamic of the gaze, and made a crystalline, unbeautiful moment of art out of it.



*Louis Fratino, May, 2020, oil on canvas, 36 x 20 in.*

Fratino emphasizes the erotic dimension of domestic existence. In *May*, amid the clutter of a bathroom sink, it takes us a moment to register the viewer's partner (again, this painting takes a first-person perspective; the viewer plays a character dictated by the painter) sitting naked on a bed, just visible around a corner in the angled medicine-chest mirror. This painting is heavily populated with detail – those odd bits of marine life that collect in bathrooms, cut flowers, pill bottles, postcards, a razor, a soap dish with a flower painted on it. But if you look more closely still, you can catch your own naked torso reflected in the chrome faucet (a trick Fratino deploys in other paintings as well), the bends in a narrow stream of water trickling from the faucet, and above all, a marvelously

observed ring of bristles around the sink, where you have shaved and then let the water drain, leaving your stubble behind.

When writing fiction, one encounters a problem: there are all kinds of details about life which cannot be verbalized. Or at least, not efficiently enough to catch the sense of them, the intensity and minuteness of their passage. You stitch together a simulacrum of life's texture, but your characters stumble through a half-dim world missing many of life's most specific and fleeting grace notes.

Conversely, cinema is great at photographing these grace notes, but quite poor at prompting the viewer to recognize their transcendent qualities, their profundity.

These New Quotidian painters are crafting paintings which verge on literary narratives. Neither Madsen, nor Lundy, nor Fratino, is capable of synthesizing a painting based on technique and aesthetics alone. They must find a story to tell in each painting, and without a good story, they are nowhere. It's a challenging way to make work, and it requires them to excavate personal and specific anecdotes out of a lifetime of observation and experience. Unlike literature, however, their narratives do not tell you a before and an after. Unlike cinema, they do not rush along to the next image. Suspended in a dense present, their paintings blossom with those elusive grace notes which, taken in sum, convey emotions so overpowering that they could better be described as memories.

Now, we have why I think we should call them Quotidians, but why call them New?

Well, it's not like nobody's ever thought to paint the quotidian before. When considering the domestic, we think instantly of the Dutch, and in this context, of Jan Steen.



*Jan Steen, Wealth is Looking, or, In Luxury Look Out, 1663, oil on canvas, 41 x 57 in.*

Steen's interiors are such messes that the Dutch apparently insult one another's housekeeping with the epithet, "You have a house like a Jan Steen." *Wealth is Looking, or, In Luxury Look Out* presents a typically hectic Steen scenario. Narratives play out between the figures, and each represents a type – but they also represent individuals. There is symbolic content to the objects arranged around the room, but at the same time Steen was clearly familiar with a floor covered in crap. His painting bursts with humor and life, situated squarely within the quotidian.



*Henri Matisse, Interior with Phonograph, 1924, oil on canvas, 28 x 24 in.*

Some years later, Henri Matisse condensed almost a century of Impressionist investigation of the quotidian into a series of images of living rooms with open windows. He devoted himself to the wistful beauty of a room aglow with daylight coming through the window on a sunny afternoon. To achieve this sense, he had to observe not only light

and color, but object and context – wallpaper, drapery, the style of the furniture, what was on the table. He had to become awake to the normal in order to make it luminous. He is not telling a grand story from history or mythology, but only a little scene, such as we ourselves might encounter. By drawing our attention to its beauty, he gently instructs us in how to see beauty in life as it can be expected to be lived.

The discovery of the quotidian is quite old. But times change, and the everyday changes – somewhat. In the present instance, art history changes.

This is a very skewed and partial account of recent figuration, but as I see it, in the early postmodernist period, a school of artists emerged who were caught on the horns of a brutal dilemma. They could not bear to work outside the mainstream art world, and yet they would not abandon sincere figurative painting. Many of them adopted a self-conscious naiveté of technique, embracing awkward figuration and awkward paint-handling. Julian Schnabel and Eric Fischl come to mind – Fischl describes wrestling with this problem in his excellent memoir *Bad Boy*. Although Fischl tackles deep questions of psychology, culture, and memory in his work, he, like Schnabel, foregrounds the aesthetic struggle. The paintings are in large part about their dialogue with the history and then-current crisis of painting.



*Eric Fischl, Birth of Love, 1981, oil on canvas, 72 x 96 in.*

A generation later, Dana Schutz worked, and works, within this paradigm while still grappling with its aesthetic and art historical implications. Her art is about its subject, but it never stops also being about art.



A generation later still, two or three generations now into the doctrine of awkward figuration, Madsen, Lundy, and Fratino emerge as artists raised in it as a tradition. Fratino owes more to Picasso, Lundy to Schutz, and Madsen to pop and comic book art. But all three of these New Quotidians assume their picture-making tools much more than they interrogate them. And so, in their work, they use these tools with an ease and expressivity which was not available to the innovators.

All three of these New Quotidians use space itself as a symbolic matrix. Earlier generations had to work hard to deconstruct the one- and two-point perspectives of Western art. That project is so thoroughly complete that young artists are not hindered from seeing semiotic possibilities in their personal modes of spatial construction. Madsen, Lundy, and Fratino all construct space not as a configuration of objects within a fixed underlying grid, but as a constellation of objects placed entirely in relation to their narrative and emotional immediacy. They do not ask *Where is it?* They ask *What do I notice?* They make a picture of what they notice, of what is meaningful – and the rest will fit, or not, as the picture permits. And yet, though they all use this method, their individual representations of space are very different. Madsen uses the large size of figures relative to the canvas to express anxiety over the size of one's body, and she arranges images in shallow, unstable diagonals. Fratino expresses a more serene outlook by means of ultra-stable rectangles. And Lundy arranges space in a rotating whirl, her eye catching detail after detail as if life were a carousel observed from inches away.

So they are Quotidians because they depict the everyday, and they are New because they are leveraging a freshly-minted art historical moment to find a new, and riveting, means of expressing the experience of living. **WM**



#### DANIEL MAIDMAN

Daniel Maidman is best known for his vivid depiction of the figure. Maidman's drawings and paintings are included in the permanent collections of the Library of Congress, the New Britain Museum of American Art, the Wausau Museum of Contemporary Art, the Long Beach Museum of Art, the Bozeman Art Museum, and the Marietta Cobb Museum of Art. His work is included in numerous private collections, including those of Brooke Shields, China Miéville, and Jerry Saltz. His art and writing on art have been featured in *The Huffington Post*, *Poets/Artists*,

*ARTnews*, *Forbes*, *W*, and many others. He has been shown in solo shows in New York City and in group shows across the United States and Europe. In 2021 it will be included in the first digital archive of art stored on the surface of the Moon. His books, *Daniel Maidman: Nudes* and *Theseus: Vincent Desiderio on Art*, are available from Griffith Moon Publishing. He works in Brooklyn, New York.

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