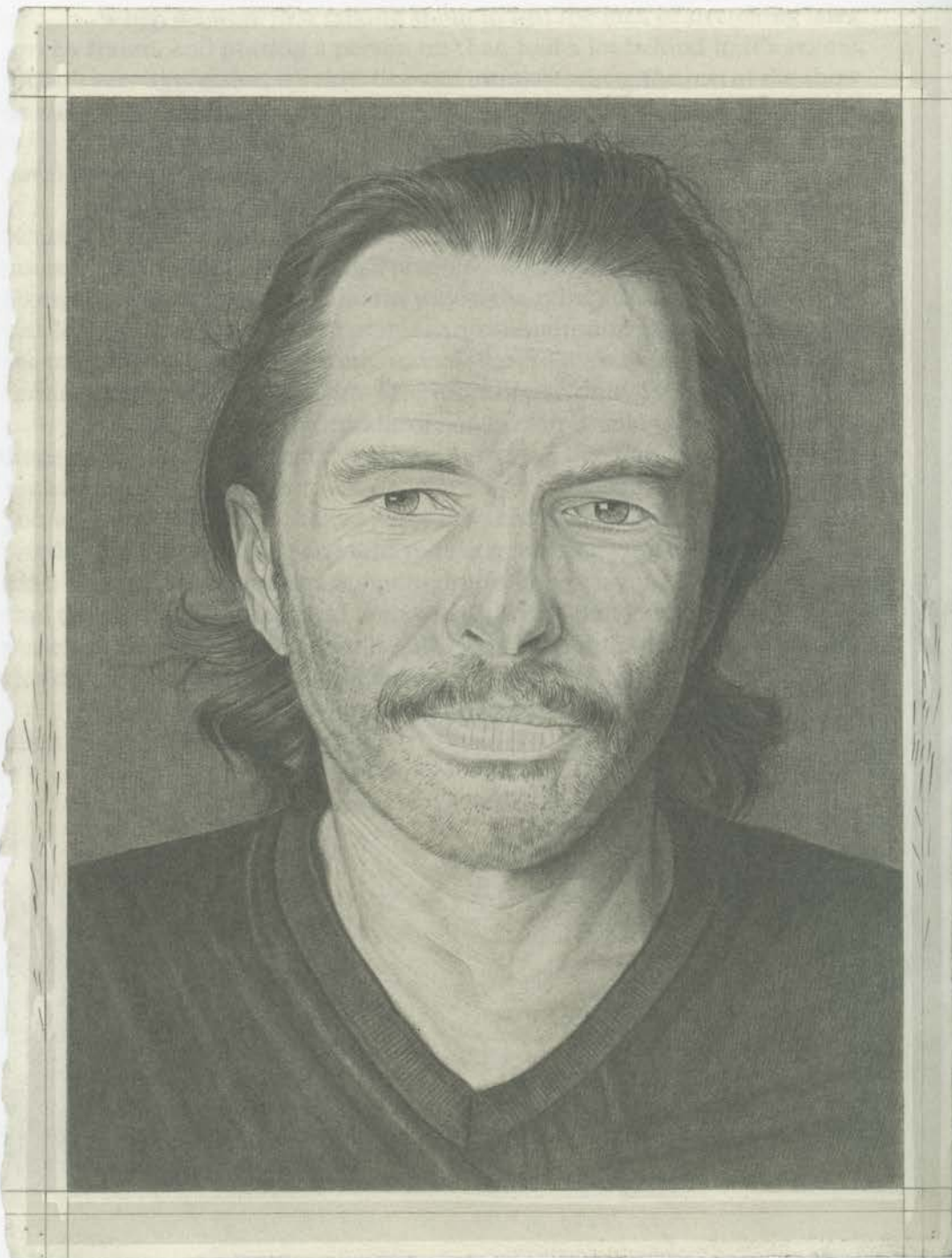


TELL ME SOMETHING GOOD

ARTIST INTERVIEWS FROM

THE BROOKLYN RAIL



Matvey Levenstein with Phong Bui

2009

PB You were born in 1960 in Moscow and grew up under the Brezhnev regime, which was considered by many Russians preferable to the regimes of Khrushchev or Gorbachev. Was that true for you and your family?

ML Khrushchev was ousted when I was four, so I don't have much of a memory of his regime, but I remember my parents saying there was a post-Stalinist sense of emancipation and liberation. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was getting published—people were talking about the Stalinist repression quite openly. Things were opening up to the rest of the world. When I was growing up, during Brezhnev's period, it was relatively liberal, but very hypocritical and still potentially very treacherous and violent. We left the USSR in January of 1980, and I learned about the invasion of Afghanistan while window-shopping in Vienna. I realized how lucky I was to have gotten out just in time, because I was exactly at that age when I would have been drafted into the army.

PB Did being Jewish make things more difficult for you and your family?

ML There was a fairly specific anti-Semitic policy in place, where I pretty much knew that I shouldn't bother to, for example, apply to Moscow State University for most departments there, because I would just not be accepted. I should not try to be a lawyer or a doctor, or any other stereotypical Jewish professions, because they would not take any Jews. Being an artist was a little easier; they didn't care about Jews becoming artists.

PB What did your parents do?

ML My father was, until recently, an engineer. He just retired and became a published writer, all of a sudden—they actually just published his autobiography in Russia—and my mother was and still is a musician and a piano teacher. Actually, when I was growing up I thought I would become, like my parents, either an engineer or a musician. In fact I did study music, but I had always been drawing and painting and would show it to my uncle, who was an architect. One day a musician friend of my parents came to our house and saw my paintings on the walls, and he said, "Why don't you just do this instead of something you're not interested in?" So all of a sudden it dawned on me, "Well, why not?" But then the trouble was I couldn't get into any art schools, because I was not the son of an artist, and my parents didn't know anybody, so they couldn't bribe anybody. Besides, I knew that being in art school then meant being indoctrinated into socialist realism, and for political reasons I wanted nothing to do with it, so that was the other drawback. So I went to architecture school instead.

PB The Moscow Architectural Institute.

ML Yeah, and in order to even get in you had to pass some pretty strenuous exams in drawing and sciences, but once you got in you were relatively left alone there, which I thought was a good compromise, and many other artists I knew did the same thing. Lev Manovich, now a new-media artist and critic who wrote the book *The Language of New Media*, was there with me. He is in California now and we are still very good friends. I was at the

school from '76 to '79; I think it was three semesters, and then my family left Russia.

PB What was the reason?

ML Political, of course. I came from a family of jailbirds. Essentially, every single member of my family, with the exception of my mother and one of my grandmothers, was arrested. My grandfather died in the camps. The other grandfather was there twice but survived. My father was arrested when he was twenty-two. After Stalin died and my father returned to Moscow from exile, he met my mother and they had me. Though I grew up with underground literature in the house, my parents did not want to be active dissidents. They just wanted a quiet life. But it had always been my father's dream to leave Russia, to start a new life somewhere else. And then I found out there was an informant among my college friends and the KGB was watching me. It seemed like family history was repeating itself, so we left Russia.

PB So your family came directly to Chicago after that!

ML Well, we spent a bit of time in Europe, while our papers were being processed. We were in Vienna, then Rome for a few months before coming to Chicago.

PB Where you went to school at the Art Institute. So by then you really knew that you were going to be an artist!

ML Well, it seemed almost too self-important to call myself an artist at that time. In addition, being an immigrant, the pressure of making a living was a bit intense, so I really thought I would be a designer of sorts. But one of the reasons I wanted to come to America was to study art. The Art Institute of Chicago at that point was still a seventies-type school—it was very loose, you could just study whatever you wanted—so for me it was great. They had an interior architecture department, where I put in most of my hours, but then I studied performance, film, and painted all the time—I just floated around taking in all that I could with pleasure, because it was a new country. Prior to coming to America, my art education sort of stopped with Chagall and the postimpressionists. A bit of Picasso, because he was a communist, so I was just like a wild and groovy Czechoslovak brother in the promised land. I just did everything.

PB What sort of work were you doing while you were in school?

ML I painted the most awful painting, called *Russian in Chicago*, referring to the cubo-futurist Malevich painting *An Englishman in Moscow*. [Laughter.] Thinking about it now, I should be embarrassed for liking Chagall, who I still don't think is as bad as they say. In any case, I started doing shaped canvases with collage elements, sometimes spilling into an installation. I was influenced by Rauschenberg. His combines just blew my mind. Anyway, I was only in school for three years, because according to them, in Russia I studied so much within those three semesters that I was supposed to be immediately a senior, and I said, "I don't want to get out just yet." And since my parents had absolutely no money, I was on scholarships, and life in Chicago was so cheap and my apartment was costing almost nothing; I could paint there. So I decided just to stick around school as long as I possibly could.

PB What was your subject matter?

ML At that point, who knew about subject matter? It was so intuitive; if something reminded me of a white dragon, I would call it *The White Dragon*. Because I stopped writing letters to my girlfriend and my other friends, worrying that I could cause them trouble—this was during the Reagan/Andropov time when the US-Soviet relationship really soured—letters became the subject matter for my paintings. It was very sentimental, but that's what you did when you were in school.

- PB And then you applied to graduate school at Yale?
- ML Well, first I took a couple years off, including a good four or five months when I was in Europe on a traveling grant. That experience was hugely transformative, but it made me realize that I really needed some more schooling, which was when I applied to Yale.
- PB In addition to visiting artists and critics who come and go, there was always the presence of three main staples at Yale: the intellectual brilliance and generosity of Andrew Forge, the immense knowledge of figurative painting in William Bailey, and the conceptual rigor in Mel Bochner.
- ML There was also Jake Berthot, who was equally important to all of us. Vija Celmins was particularly maternal toward my work and me. When I got there I began to think that I was avoiding something by not facing painting, what I later termed "autonomous painting." I tried to make these really just straight-on figurative paintings—I was dimly beginning to perceive a split between trajectories of avant-garde art making and painting, and of course I wanted to be an avant-garde artist. Who doesn't, right?
- PB Especially after the Rauschenberg combines.
- ML Exactly. The only thing I could think of was to go back to the roots of painting, to the stories that created painting in the first place. I remember I painted Adam and Eve, the return of the prodigal son—they were the most awful paintings. But they were at least honest. I thought that if I just hit my head against the brick wall, perhaps something would emerge—something would emerge as a form of painting.
- PB So you really have faith in that process.
- ML Oh, yeah. They were really awful paintings. [Laughter.] Mel actually really liked this one painting, which he called "the farting Madonna." Mel was probably the one who immediately had the most effect on me, and he talked to me quite a bit. He told me I knew nothing about women, for example, and that my paintings were all about masturbation, because it's all about nothing but knowing yourself. Stuff like that; he was quite funny. Of course a lot of that had to do with my own insecurities about how I was fitting myself into a larger context. I was a very insecure object; therefore my painting was, to me, a very insecure object. So then I decided, since I couldn't define its social context, I could at least define its immediate physical context. I quit painting and started building these concrete walls whose existence would be so undeniable that you couldn't dismiss it. To give you an example of the kind of decadence of what I was doing until then, I was painting this giant neo-expressionist-inspired painting of a woman, then I stuck a broken bottle in the middle of her chest until I actually cut myself and started bleeding into the paint. I couldn't believe in the reality of what expressionism was all about. Anyway, I taught myself some fundamental skills of carpentry and started building these concrete walls—I would mix concrete as if it was paint, and I said to myself, "Okay, this is a wall that I just built, and I'm going to now paint something on it"—but I didn't know what. A friend of mine in the sculpture department came over and she looked at what I was doing and she said, "Well, why do you need to paint? That would be redundant. Your wall is already so figurative. Look at the presence of your hand marks, why do you need to add anything more to it?" And all of a sudden I realized she was absolutely right. The surface of the wall, which started as the wetness of the concrete being paint-like, became the image. Then the surface became a wall, then a form. Then I built a dome, a wheel, a bed, a winged staircase. All of a sudden I was making these concrete objects, very raw, very rough, kind of almost medieval looking.

- PB And then you became a sculptor.
- ML Mostly by default. I remember Tom Butter came over and said, "Oh, the sculpture students should come over to your studio because you know so little about carpentry that it forces you to invent things." I was in the painting department, but not painting. And in some ways it was my way of hiding out. But I was always listening, and there were these great arguments that would break out in the final crit. Listening to Mel argue with Bailey and Andrew Forge was fantastic. Andrew Forge said this one thing that really influenced me quite strongly: he was talking about Degas, whom he wrote a book about, and how Degas really wanted to be a reactionary, a traditionalist, but he saw no way back, so he became an avant-gardist almost by default. That kind of thinking became really important in moving to my mature works. In other words, by moving backward you in fact can step ahead. Another thing Andrew was talking about was postmodernism, which at that point was still sort of a relatively new notion, and I remember he said, "With the exception of you, Matvey, who actually did experience a revolution firsthand, most of us have not. Modernism is the dust blown up into the air by the French Revolution, and postmodernism is perhaps the dust finally settling down into some form of order that we can't quite comprehend the pattern of."
- PB That's certainly truer now than it was when it took the New York art world by storm.
- ML Overall I was lucky to have been there when there was a very significant group of teachers and students: Richard Phillips, John Currin, Sean Landers, and my wife, Lisa Yuskavage, of course. All of whom I am still in touch with.
- PB In reference to Degas going back to the history of painting, in his case it was his obsession with Ingres and Raphael, yet moving forward for him meant his use of photography—cropping and other compositional devices. Similarly, by your own necessity, having made drawings of portrait work with such a heightened sense of contrast, it made sense that you would move toward three-dimensional objects. Plus, it promises to infuse both realism and abstraction.
- ML That's exactly what happened after I moved to New York: my work became these vulgar combinations of animal forms with male beer bellies sitting on top of them or breasts hanging on the walls. In order to build them with concrete I actually had to make fairly elaborate drawings that were kind of becoming drawings in their own right. While I was making the drawings, which required some aspects of rendering, a process that I had neglected and avoided for a long time, I realized I really enjoy this refined, quiet activity. While I was trying to throw the shit around with the sculpture, which was all very physical and very masculine, secretly I would sit in the corner with a pencil and render a perfect form with light, shadow, the reflected light, and so on.
- PB You don't know how sensitive you are until you allow yourself to be.
- ML [Laughter.] Right. The truth was I was trying too hard to assimilate. It's weird because the whole point was about liberation. Another thing was that I was beginning to really suspect that avant-gardism, especially in its progressivist form, was not the pure moral and political force that everybody thought it was. I realized that the only reason why the avant-gardists became such heroes was that Hitler and Stalin didn't like what they were making. They got rejected by totalitarian power first, but when they were not rejected by Mussolini, for example, they flocked to that power more often than not. As a matter of fact, seeking moral safety, to be on the winning good side, is just an act of conformity.

PB That's what happened to Kazimir Malevich and Mario Sironi, for example. Their late works became the demonstrations of their indoctrinated ideologies.

ML You know what? At least I'm not going to delude myself that I'm morally safe. The first thing I did was a series of self-portraits where I drew myself from observation, making myself as if I was made out of a plaster cast. These weren't done from photographs, they were actually done looking in a mirror—I don't know how many hours they took, but I rendered every personality or identity I could possibly think of. One was bald with a goatee. Of course that was Lenin. One with a goatee and long hair was called *Bohemian* [1992]. In one I drew myself with a much greater hooked nose and all these anti-Semitic tropes, so that was *The Jew* [1992]. I thought some aspects of it were too ironic, too layered, too postmodernist, but I really liked the way they looked and their presence, and somebody aptly called them "neo-Stalinesque." So I just progressed from there and became more interested in the idea of autonomy and making autonomous paintings. That was when I adopted the use of photography.

PB I read Suzanne Moore's essay in the catalogue of your first show at Larissa Goldston a few years ago, and she mentioned that you admired Ingres, and that you don't trust any expressionistic impulses. Actually, one of the first books I bought was the Borden edition on Ingres by Stephen Longstreet, who I met at the Studio School in 1986; he told me that Vincent Price, the actor, had told him that Ingres, in correct pronunciation, should be like the word "angry" without the "y." Isn't that perfect? [Laughter.] It stuck in my mind forever. In any case, a lot of credit has been given to Ingres because of what Robert Rosenblum described as his coolly disciplined and warmly sensual style. Picasso recognized in his paintings the acute visual perception that accommodates the abstract order. But Jacques-Louis David, his teacher, was just as radical: by adopting classical relief, he reduced the use of perspectival recession while maintaining the atmospheric effects and making the linear contours more pronounced—like figures across the picture plane.

ML Yeah, David can be thought of as kind of a punk reaction to the sophistication of baroque and specifically rococo painting. In any case, with the exception of *The Death of Marat*, I don't like David and have always preferred Ingres. Ingres, I think, was both more complex and perverse as an artist when he combined baroque sensuality with abstracted forms. Ingres is still fascinating to me.

PB I agree. We identify with his terrific and expressive distortions of form and space, which opened up another possible language to cubism, the curvilinear structure that allowed Picasso to break away from his previous analytical and synthetic phases. In some ways I believe this was what de Kooning discovered. We can see that response in his standing and seated figures from 1938, in the greater dismemberment of the body in *Pink Angels* of 1945. Which actually, thinking of de Kooning's sometimes garish palette, full of harsh contrast, blue, pinkish tones against bright orange and ochre, reminds me that it appears you deliberately heighten certain local colors in such objects, perhaps more with the last group of paintings than this new one. In a painting entitled *Still Life* [2002], there were predominant green and violet pillows set in the middle of the turquoise-blue arm chair, against the cadmium-yellow wall in the back, or *Couch (Self Portrait)* [2004], with the Buddha's head in ultramarine blue lit from behind, and the deep cadmium-red couch on which your silhouetted figure sat on the far right. Is that a fair reading of those paintings?

ML I was using color as a way to figure out what is considered flat and what is spatial. To tell you the truth, while looking at de Kooning, I was also looking at a lot of Italian mannerist paintings. This idea of combining a flat shape of either neutral color or black with a very bright color was crucial for me. How can you get black to be both the shadow and the local color at the same time?

PB When did photography come into your process?

ML It was probably around '92, '93. I was making those self-portraits from observation. At the time I didn't use photography whatsoever because from my earliest training in Moscow, rendering from photography was considered a real taboo. But, since I had already committed to doing everything backward, the way Degas did it, why not try my hand at it? I remember going to the Met on a Friday night and seeing a small group of young people in their thirties and forties sitting on two or three benches and looking at paintings. And I was thinking, "They're not artists. They're not part of the art world. What are they looking at? Literally?" I realized what these paintings represented to them was a reflection and a picture of their own specificity in the world. I also realized, at least in Western culture, that paintings serve this almost biological need of representing back to us that which will never be again. So an autonomous painting represents an autonomous individual, both politically and emotionally, literally uniqueness. It made me rethink what I originally had abandoned: "How do you make a painting on a stretcher?" A painting has a discrete boundary. It does not dissolve itself into the nexus of life. It's definitely not a piece of plywood leaning against the wall and so on.

All of a sudden all of those questions, however reactionary as concepts they may appear, became utterly interesting to me. It's almost like people are being told something is wrong and yet there's a guilty pleasure in knowing what is considered wrong. It's a dirty secret and yet it's a vital need. T.S. Eliot once wrote about Virgil, where he's talking about the existence of a temporal provinciality, and universalizing a particular—not the place you're from but the period that you're living in. I think we're definitely living in these kinds of provincial moments. Though most people think that that kind of autonomous painting was not possible after postmodernism, the least I could do is depict a condition under which it was possible. Through the act of painting I could create a theatrical situation. As long as these paintings were hanging together, you could believe in that condition of possibility. I wanted to avoid the splitting of painting into form and content. All of a sudden there were all these paintings that combined progressive content with reactionary forms and people started talking about technique and subject matter. I thought *that* was really reactionary in all the worst possible ways—like we're back to nineteenth-century painting.

PB Back to Bouguereau! [Laughter.]

ML As if modernism never happened. This is why Ingres was such a fascinating artist, because he didn't realize what his true subject should be. He was trying to paint everything and anything. When you look at his religious and historical paintings, well, it's still Ingres, it's still something to look at. But it's his odalisques and portraits that we remember, though we all know that he hated doing the portraits. He only did it for the money in order to do something else. So in thinking about all of that, I thought I should limit myself to the depiction of subjects of autonomy. And then a photograph popped into my head because, again, it takes an event out of the stream of time, isolates through a frame, freezes it, and makes it a complete world. And so I started looking into my own childhood photographs and in particular those

of and by my father, who still is a very decent amateur photographer. I decided to focus on him as a figure in photographs that either he took or were taken of him. Then I started to draw a bunch of Jews for about a year. I was really dipping, on another level of autobiography, into every single technique that I was taught and did not want to learn when I was in Russia. First sumi ink washes, then I came back to cross-hatching and pencil drawing where you go from 9H to 9B as this really self-imposed discipline, and then eventually I started thinking about interiors. A friend of mine found this photo album thrown away in the garbage in Brooklyn, which depicted a Czech upper-middle-class family, and their lives in the thirties and forties. They were really fond of photographing their apartment with no people in it. There were also pictures of their skiing trips in the Alps. It was this perfect bourgeois life until it was interrupted by the German invasion. They actually photographed Eisenhower driving down the streets in Prague. Meanwhile I realized that these bourgeois upper-middle-class interiors were the spaces modernity declared war on, and yet this is the space that paintings come from and return to. So I started making large sumi ink drawings of these empty interiors. They were almost like theatrical sets, which eventually led me back to painting. I was doing all this on my own. Both John and Lisa helped me here and there. Otherwise I was reading books on materials and techniques. First I discovered the secret of grisaille, what is the combination of colors required to make a grisaille. I'd pre-tube and I'd label everything from one to nine, from light to dark, and from warm to cool. It was totally structured. I'd limit everything in one painting from one to four, or from four to eight, so every painting would have this delineated range and I would have to pull everything out of that. It was like playing scales. I was listening a lot to Bach. I was always an admirer of Bach and his use of counterpoint. I wanted to do something akin to that kind of formalism that arises out of rigid but rigorous structure.

PB In addition to the way you use color as tone, another thing I notice is that you seem to embrace the color defects of the photography.

ML Yeah. Although I can't stand digital photography. And the fact that I'm a bad photographer doesn't help. But as a whole, there's a kind of distortion of color that I think of as a form of abstraction.

PB That measures the emotional temperature of the painting. Anyway, how do you go about the process of what to include or take out from the photograph?

ML Of course, you can't possibly depict everything, whether you draw from real life or from a photograph. Either way there's always too much information, or not enough. What's important is to understand what are the pictorial needs of the image.

PB The first time we met, we spoke at length about Isaiah Berlin and his advocacy of tolerance, which goes hand in hand with pluralism. And in thinking of his landmark essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox"—

ML Tolstoy mistook his nature by being a fox, while thinking he should be the hedgehog. I am probably just the opposite. I admire the foxes, but I really am the hedgehog. I have a hard time walking and chewing gum at the same time. I can only just pound and pursue one thing, and if I do a half-decent job of that, I call it a good day. But at the same time knowing that—Berlin quoting Kant—from the crooked timber of humanity, nothing ever came out straight, why would any one of us even try to make it too straight? I mean, you've got to have a strong idea to begin something with, and do it with real rigor. But you'll be an asshole if you pursue it too purely. I'm not trying to be a purist.

Artists

All artist portraits and drawings
by Phong Bui

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| Vito Acconci
(b. 1940, New York; d. 2017,
New York) | Keltie Ferris
(b. 1977, Louisville) | David Hockney
(b. 1937, Bradford, England) |
| Ai Weiwei
(b. 1957, Beijing) | Simone Forti
(b. 1935, Florence) | Roni Horn
(b. 1955, New York) |
| Lynda Benglis
(b. 1941, Lake Charles,
Louisiana) | Andrea Fraser
(b. 1965, Billings, Montana) | Alfredo Jaar
(b. 1956, Santiago) |
| James Bishop
(b. 1927, Neosho, Missouri) | LaToya Ruby Frazier
(b. 1982, Braddock,
Pennsylvania) | Bill Jensen
(b. 1945, Minneapolis) |
| Chris Burden
(b. 1946, Boston) | Suzan Frecon
(b. 1941, Mexico,
Pennsylvania) | Alex Katz
(b. 1927, New York) |
| Vija Celmins
(b. 1938, Riga) | Coco Fusco
(b. 1960, New York) | William Kentridge
(b. 1955, Johannesburg) |
| Francesco Clemente
(b. 1952, Naples, Italy) | Robert Gober
(b. 1954, Wallingford,
Connecticut) | House of Ladosha
(La'fem Ladosha [Antonio
Blair], b. 1985, Nashville;
Neon Christina Ladosha
[Christopher Udemezue],
b. 1986, Garden City, New York;
General Rage Ladosha [Riley
Hooker], b. 1982, Fort Worth;
YSL Ladosha [Yan Sze Li],
b. 1985, Kowloon, Hong Kong;
Cunty Crawford [Adam
Radakovich], b. 1985,
Steubenville, Ohio; Magatha
Ladosha [Michael Magnan],
b. 1985, Providence) |
| Bruce Conner
(b. 1933, McPherson, Kansas;
d. 2008, San Francisco) | Leon Golub
(b. 1922, Chicago; d. 2004,
New York) | |
| Alex Da Corte
(b. 1980, Camden, New Jersey) | Ron Gorchov
(b. 1930, Chicago) | Matvey Levenstein
(b. 1960, Moscow) |
| Rosalyn Drexler
(b. 1926, New York) | Michelle Grabner
(b. 1962, Oshkosh,
Wisconsin) | |
| | Josephine Halvorson
(b. 1981, Brewster,
Massachusetts) | |
| | Sheila Hicks
(b. 1934, Hastings, Nebraska) | |

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Los Angeles, February 22, 2016.

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