Figurative-Formalist Bias

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The formalist approach – disciplined and rational

governed by intellect

objectively – analyzing the figure, focusing on physically observable phenomena

play of light

structural relationships of form

body’s spatial position and physical position within environment

“relationship minded” rather than “subject minded”
Thiebaud studied the play of light and shadow. Intensely observed, the figure is void of sentiment, presented matter-of-factly, in the most formal way possible. A strong light illuminates and isolates the figure.

Making this solitary figure the sole determinant of the composition, the artist dismisses the possibility of narrative and makes the formal components – the body’s form and the pattern of light – the total focus and content of the work.

As a figurative-formalist, the artist views the figure primarily as a compositional device, often posing it formally and consciously as a structural element.
Composition

Composition can be defined simply as the organization of all the visual elements into a unified whole. Also establishes implicit relationships that can make a series of drawings of the same model – even of the same pose, framed in different ways or seen from different angles – compositionally unique. For along with its ability to differentiate visual elements within a work of art, composition formulates the visual idea. The subject matter is not the essential objective; rather, the drawing’s construct is the central concept of the drawing.
For Matisse, the goal is to make the composition expressive as an aesthetically pleasing experience.

Henri Matisse.
Grand Odalisque a la Culotte Bayadere. 1925.
Lithograph, 21.25 x 17.25 in.
Contemporary artist Ira Korman pays homage to Whistler by making an unmistakable reference to his composition *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* more commonly called *Whistler’s Mother*.
Degas also used the figure primarily as an aesthetic device by which to break up the picture plane and on which to hang his color. He created numerous variations on such themes as the dancer and the bather. These figures in themselves have no particular significance as individuals; instead they exist as aesthetic devices.

*Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub, 1885*

Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)

Charcoal and pastel on light green wove paper; now discolored to warm gray, laid down on silk bolting

32 x 22 1/8 in. (81.3 x 56.2 cm)
These drawing, like many of his paintings, are based on his research and experimentation with light and color. His methodology of executing numerous studies of the same them, with subtle compositional changes and alterations in lighting conditions, is typical of the figurative-formalist approach, whereby the artist investigates aesthetic variations in a disciplined and controlled manner.

As Degas once said, “It is essential to do the same subject over again, ten times, a hundred times.”
Breaking Up the Pictorial Space

Edward Hopper’s small compositional sketch *Study for Morning in the City* is a preliminary drawing for his painting *Morning in a City*. This work, with its single figure situated in an interior space, presents a typical theme for Hopper. The painting and the drawing that preceded it document an external world that Hopper both observed and consciously arranged for the picture plane of his canvas.

The content comes not from narrative but, rather, from the interaction of light with the human form and the interior space. His value sketch defines the structural components of the room that will determine the design of his canvas.

The nude is a compositional component – defines the three-dimensional space divides the picture plane
Edward Hopper
*Study for Morning in a City*, 1944
Conte and pencil
8.5 x 11 in.
Edward Hopper

*Morning in a City*. 1944.

Oil on canvas, 44 x 60 in.
"A Woman in the Sun" 40 x 60 inches

Painted in Touro studio in October 1961

Winsor & Newton colors, single prime canvas

"Herse", "Flake White", "Alizarin", "Vermilion Red".

Large scale, nearly "O.K.", large figure of a woman, hands on hips,

hair, gold cigarette holder shimmering short, bright. A man on a curtain,

a window off stage right. Path of light on (in thin red, yellow hues with blue, gray, green),

(still unknown, already a move as sunlight enters the scene.)

Light on side of dance, facing east. Sky outdoors still muffled, no interior illumination.

Green, black, white, shoes. Sharp face of a woman walking.

On frame, in my name (red) or written (British at first, but written in French that changed into "Blanc"

Mrs. Albert "Harriet" 15,000

J. C. 15,650, 15,000

40,000

15,000

N. 15,650

J. C. 15,000

15,650

15,000

10,000

This woman of the future is not alone in this early light. She added her "a woman with a".
Edward Hopper, *A Woman in the Sun*, 1961. Oil on canvas, 40 1/8 × 61 1/4 in. (101.9 × 155.6 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; 50th Anniversary Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Hackett in honor of Edith and Lloyd Goodrich 84.31
Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, and others were dubbed San Francisco Bay Area Figuratists in the late 1950’s. Their work was seen as a West Coast antithesis to the New York Abstract Expressionism of the same period.

As in Hopper’s drawing, the figure form the focal point of the composition, at the intersection where the vertical panels of dark value in the background cross the horizontal structural elements of the table and counter. Bischoff’s drawing extends the value patterns on the body into those of its surroundings, each shape supported by and attached to the next until anchored securely to the outer frame. He divides the space and defines the structural relationships as the main subject of the work.

Diebenkorn’s figurative drawings, done before he turned to thoroughly abstract compositions, employ the figure to the same end: a compositional arrangement of elements. Diebenkorn prefers to zoom in on his subject, letting the body fill more of the picture frame.

Diebenkorn does not want to make psychological contact with the face. He wants meaning of the work from the whole composition and not through the personality of the model. The meaning of the work is composition. The physical and purely visual relationships are what is relevant.

Diebenkorn’s presentation of the figure is drained of personality to more freely communicate his aesthetic concern for pictorial design.

Diebenkorn defines the body as much by drawing its surroundings as by drawing the figure itself.

Richard Diebenkorn
*Seated Woman*
Charcoal
Collection of Eve Benesch Goldschmidt
Philip Pearlstein
*Female Model Seated on a Lozenge-Pattered Drape*
ink on paper
1976
22 1/2 in x 29 3/4 in
Portland Art Museum, Portland Oregon

(sepia wash on paper)
Pearlstein is more concerned with depicting the body as a three-dimensional volume in a space one could occupy.

“The volumetric torso, limbs and other parts of the figure have to move choreographically through measurable three-dimensional space; simultaneously they must be the primary architectonic units of the strongest possible two-dimensional structure.”

He seeks to remain completely objective. Pearlstein wants his nudes to be psychologically neutral.

Although he offers sensory material – furniture, oriental rugs, naked flesh – we are expected to keep our distance and to appreciate these objects on a higher intellectual level.

Pearlstein draws his figures large within the picture frame, often cropping faces at the edge, which adds to their anonymity. He treats the body as a still life object, observing and rendering it with detachment. Attempts to deal with the facts, visual presentation of light and form.
Philip Pearlstein. *Two Seated Models, One on Eames Chair*. 1982. charcoal. 30¼ x 44 in.
Philip Pearlstein
*Back of Seated Model Facing Mirror No. 1*
1967
graphite
14 x 11 in.
Philip Pearlstein
*Model With Duck Kiddy Car on Killim Rug*

part of the exhibition "Philip Pearlstein: Paintings and Watercolors, 1990-2007" at the University Art Gallery at Stony Brook University. Exhibition dates from Oct. 16 through Dec. 8, 2007
Philip Pearlstein Model with Old Iron Butcher Sign #2 2003
oil on canvas, 36-1/4 x 48 inches
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
Two Female Models Reclining on a Cast-Iron Bed
1968
Philip Pearlstein (American, 1924 - )
Oil on canvas
72"H x 72"W
182.8 cm x 182.8 cm
Philip Pearlstein (American, b. 1924)
Two Nudes in Studio, 1965
Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 in. (60.96 x 45.72 cm)
Westheimer Family Collection, 2005.063
© Philip Pearlstein
Philip Pearlstein

*Iron Bed and Plastic Chair*

1999, oil on canvas, 59.5 x 39.5 inches

©Philip Pearlstein, courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
In a purely linear composition Regina Granne uses the model as but one object in her interior still-life. As in the game of chess, where one move prompts another, in the act of drawing, each line takes into account all the preceding ones.

The line works first to divide the surface of the drawing and then to penetrate it, implying a great deal of space with the addition of linear perspective.

Every representational composition works with two levels of reality, one that deals with the two-dimensional surface and another that penetrates the surface to present the illustration of volume and space.