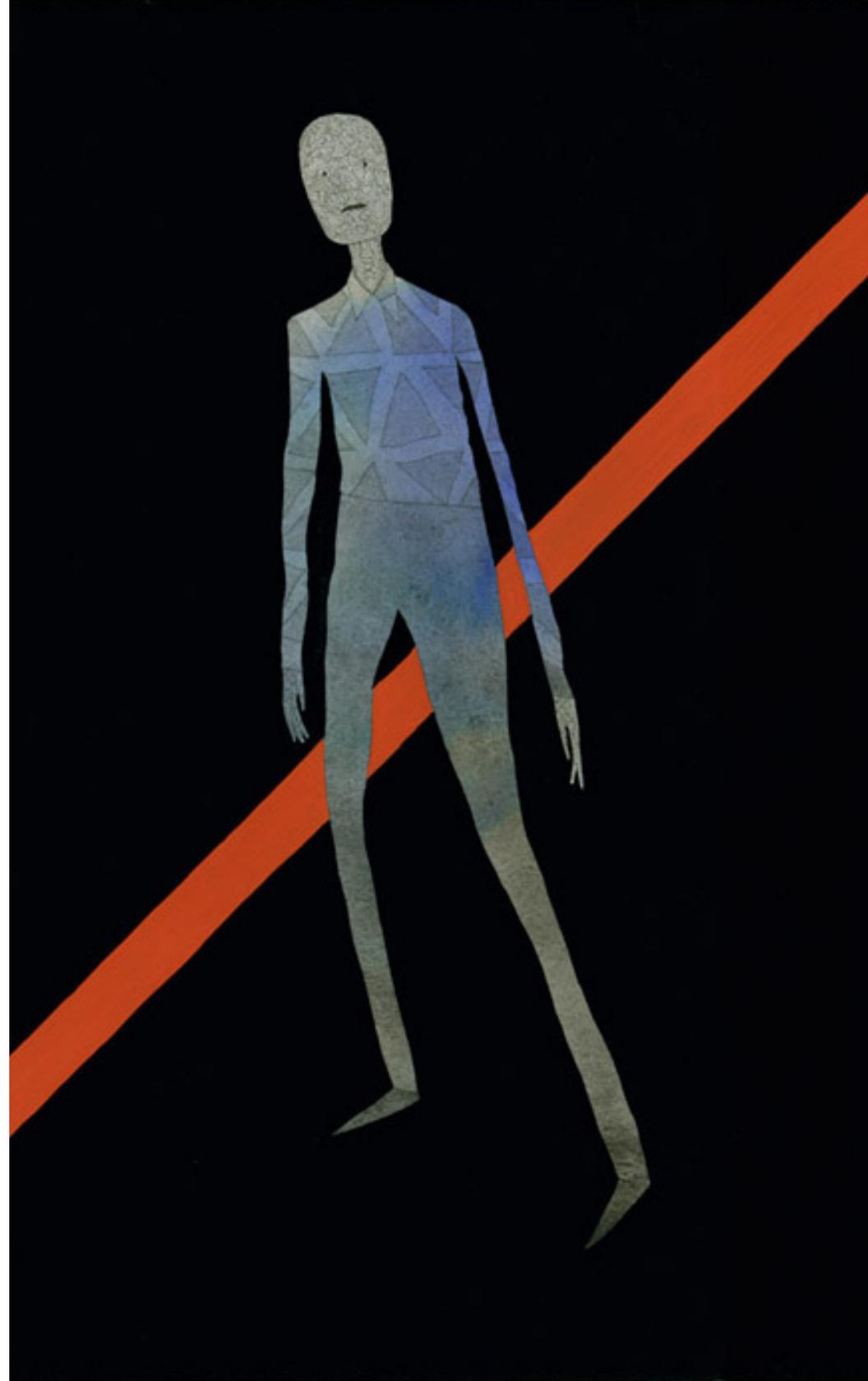




Above: Tom Reed, *bridge is out*, 2010. Mixed media on found paper, 25 x 24 ½ inches.  
Courtesy of the artist.



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# Figure Studies: Recent Representational Works on Paper

In Steven Spielberg’s 1993 blockbuster film *Jurassic Park*, scientist and chaos theorist Ian Malcolm scolds themepark mogul John Hammond for re-creating dinosaurs that eventually run amok by stating that his scientists, “were so preoccupied with whether they could that they didn’t stop to think if they should.” One could make a similar claim for much of the technology we live with today, including the very CGI (Computer-Generated Imaging) responsible for the illusory dinosaurs that made the film such a resounding success. While CGI has, admittedly, transformed the possibility for the unreal to look remarkably real, in many instances, it has eliminated a “human” quality that allows us to empathize or identify with what we see onscreen. The six artists featured in *Figure Studies: Recent Representational Works on Paper* evoke the spirit of Malcolm’s statement through their commitment to the hand-drawn or painted image, suggesting that just because one can technologically render real or imagined worlds, it does not necessarily mean one should.

A renewed appreciation of the immediacy and heightened sense of authenticity that works on paper possess has increasingly

prompted artists to make them a key, if not central, focus of their practice. Though representing the world through mark-making on paper is one of the most traditional and fundamental ways to create art, the artists participating in this exhibition emphatically infuse this process with contemporary sensibilities and attitudes. In addition to expanding the formal and material possibilities of working in this manner, they produce figurative works on paper that explore such urgent issues and concerns as racial and sexual identity, what the body has become (and is becoming) in the twenty-first century, and our relationship to history and historical imagery.

Ida Applebroog’s *Rose* (2005-2009) reflects an ongoing interest in the continued transformation of the human body in reality and visual culture. It comprises twenty-six representations of what appears to be the same figure, executed on the synthetic polyester material mylar, and gampi, a Japanese paper that has been treated to give it a more tactile quality. Applebroog’s use of these skin-like surfaces enhances her depiction of a gaunt and presumably female figure. Her variation of

background colors, as well as the colors and shapes of the figures themselves, suggests that the work represents a portrait of “Rose” either over a period of time or in different frames of mind or situations. The figure is presented throughout the work in an identical, slightly-stooped profile that not only conveys a sense of physical awkwardness but also exaggerates the minute discrepancies in hairstyle, breast size, and overall proportions from representation to representation. *Rose* ultimately suggests how our bodies naturally change shape, and how the body may be altered by choice, by disease, or through other circumstances.

The series of five works from 2006 presented by John Bankston is characteristic of his use of a vibrant drawing style to address issues of race, masculinity, and sexual identity. The serious and mature themes of his work are offset both by a playful appearance reminiscent of coloring books for children, and by his use of fairytale-like narratives. This series focuses on the leather-clad character Mr. L, following him from two abstract maze-like situations to interactions with different characters in imaginary landscapes. In the two *Funny Maze* works in particular, he demonstrates a sense of formal experimentation in his integration of abstract and figurative sensibilities. Bankston’s work ultimately shifts our understanding of romantic and social relationships between men through the unconventional use of representational style associated with the innocence of childhood rather than the experience of adulthood.

Jennifer Bornstein’s meticulously crafted yet loosely drawn small etched portraits feature subjects ranging from specific historical figures to acquaintances of the artist and more generally contemporary social “types.” Her use of the very traditional medium of copperplate etching to represent situations and people more associated with the present day (or even recent history) not only breathes new life into this artistic approach but also lends a strange significance to such everyday activities as checking one’s email or lacing up a pair of sneakers. Bornstein uses the phrase “Study for a 16mm Film” in some of the titles of these works to suggest a possible dual role as preparatory drawings for scenes in a film. A more pictorial relationship to film or other time-based visual media is found in two *Untitled* works from 2010, one showing a screen (television or movie) image of nude woman washing herself, and the other a film projector depicting a film of another nude woman in a prone position on the floor. As in the other etchings, their extreme visual economy gives them a documentary, factual presence rather than suggesting a particular story or scene, leaving the viewer to resolve the intent and meaning of the images for oneself.

Alejandro Cardenas’s series *Arctic Cross* (2008) develops a fictional narrative centered on a stranded arctic explorer who lives on indefinitely, encountering ghosts and beings from outer space. The elegant presentation of refined figures (reminiscent of the subjects in works by nineteenth-century artists Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele) against a stark, black background reflects the artist’s interest in beauty and how we understand it not only pictorially but also physically and

emotionally. Cardenas’s investigation of how more abstract ideas such as ideology or belief are represented visually is intriguingly evoked in the work, *A Spaceship Landing*. Its presentation of a lone crucifix-shaped form immediately prompts associations with Christian religious iconography, yet the title’s suggestion that an alien spacecraft (or landing pad) could conceivably resemble a cross encourages us to consider how symbols and signs often possess multiple meanings. While the *Arctic Cross* works feature characters and situations from science fiction, they depart insistently from the style and sensibility that is typically used to depict these kinds of scenes and phenomena in popular culture.

While Cardenas’s work aesthetically redeems standard visual representations of extraterrestrial life and space travel, Djordje Ozbolt’s drawings conversely bring a subversive sense of humor to the subjects and styles in traditional art history. His drawings mirror his paintings’ introduction of disproportionate or totally inappropriate objects or characters into scenes resembling those in famous works of art from the past. For example, one drawing presents a nude female figure whose voluptuous figure and pendulous breasts are more appropriate to a pin-up magazine than a “serious” art work. Another work depicts a religious figure — a saint or even Jesus Christ himself — holding a cartoon-like bunny rather than a more expected religious icon such as a holy book or a crucifix. Ozbolt’s satirical take on established art history encourages us to question other traditions in society and culture.

The imaginative representation of fantastic landscapes in Tom Reed’s works on paper reflect such art historical inspirations as the visionary work of the twentieth-century outsider artists Joseph Yoakum and Henry Darger. Natural motifs such as acorns or flowers function as compositional devices to frame colorful scenes and subjects in the works *schooner michigan 1* (2007) and *flower teepee* (2010). Flowers are especially exaggerated, prompting our perception of them to shift between representations of familiar plants to abstract patterns of radiating circular forms. Reed also provides a sense of depth to the surface of his works through a subtle use of collage. An underlying theme of hopelessness versus hope informs the works included in *Figure Studies*, with the recurrence of more “negative” subjects such as broken bridges, ruins, and tree stumps tempered by the positive energy of their being rendered in such dynamic colors, forms, and compositions.