

Trends to Watch in 2021: Craft Figuration

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Jacqui Palumbo Jan 13, 2021 2:48pm

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This January, Artsy is launching a series of three features to spotlight the trends we're watching in 2021. Using our internal data, each of these features reflects a theme we saw emerge during the end of 2020 that we expect to take hold across the contemporary art world in the year ahead. This week, we share the second installment, "Craft Figuration." In the wake of the resurgence of figurative painting over the past decade, artists' depictions of the body through craft mediums have recently been met with great enthusiasm. This "Craft Figuration" trend, however, is not new. It is an impulse that can be traced through centuries of art history, from Paleolithic clay Venus figurines to the black-figure pottery of ancient Greece to the tapestries of medieval Europe. Yet now, contemporary artists are turning to these mediums to explore identity in new ways, using craft techniques to convey cultural histories and personal experiences through the human form.

This trend coincides with the widespread embrace of craft within the art world in recent years. Often cast as lower art forms and denigrated as "women's work" in the past, craft mediums are increasingly esteemed and even recognized as a form of rebellion, of activism. In the 1980s, Judy Chicago worked with more than 150 needleworkers for the "Birth Project," while for decades, Faith Ringgold has tapped into the powerful narrative history of quilting. Craft mediums also speak to a diverse range of cultures and their diasporas, and when contemporary artists use them, they can invoke those histories. The 10 contemporary artists featured here are creating works that reflect this growth of craft figuration.

Kimathi Mafafo

B. 1984, Kimberley, South Africa. Lives and works in Cape Town.



In Kimathi Mafafo’s lush embroidered scenes, Black women retreat to nature’s respite, draped in flowing garments. They are solitary figures set in enchanted gardens, with embroidered threads that change from delicate florals to loose, abstracted thickets of color.

Mafafo explores themes of womanhood and motherhood, but she also comments on the rigidity of cultural expectations. Her recent series “Voiceless”—a collaboration with Ghanaian tailor Mustapha Saadu—centers on women who feel like they lack agency in their relationships.

“When I hear stories from other women, I feel like I should be that voice for them,” Mafafo said in a studio visit with 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, which she exhibited in through her gallery Ebony/Curated in 2020. “So that they can see the strength in me... that they can be the women they want to be.”

The South African artist believes her work is healing, but she also sees her practice as a way to build community. According to her gallery in London, [Kristin Hjellegjerde](#), she has organized an informal embroidery society for a group of women in Cape Town.

Marcellina Akpojotor

B. 1989, Lagos, Nigeria. Lives and works in Lagos.



Marcellina Akpojotor breathes new life into discarded fabrics by creating intricate collages of domestic life. The Lagos-based artist sources bold Ankara textiles from local tailors, building up layered scenes through colorful scraps. Ankara prints are associated with Africa—though they have Dutch origins—and are often worn for weddings and other major life events. “I was so inspired by those materials,” Akpojotor has said. “In this part of the world we use them to celebrate all kinds of festivity: burial, naming ceremony, wedding.”

The figures in her scenes—often her family members—are pensive, or in the middle of daily tasks. Some works feature Akpojotor’s daughter, Kesiena: In *Bloom* (2019), she waters plants, while in *Shapes, Numbers and Colours* (2019), she does homework (the latter work was created in collaboration with Kesiena). In group portraits, people gather in the home, engaged in conversations with one another.

There is magic in the way Akpojotor renders her figures’ skin. Made of innumerable pieces of Ankara prints, it is permeable, opening up to take on the background hues, imbuing her figures with a sense of ephemerality.

Klaas Rommelaere

B. 1986, Roeselare, Belgium. Lives and works in Antwerp.

Klaas Rommelaere began his career in fashion, interning for designers Henrik Vibskov and Raf Simons, but he found the industry too limiting for his handcrafted aspirations. Since then, he has turned his childlike and uncanny illustrations of personal memory into cross-stitched, crocheted, and knitted tapestries and sculptural forms.

Rommelaere has long collaborated with local seamstresses from his hometown to produce his work. However, for the latest iteration of his show “Dark Uncles,” which first appeared at [Galerie Zink](#), Belgium’s Texture Museum put out an open call during the spring coronavirus lockdown, asking people to assist the artist from their homes. They received nearly 100 respondents.

“Dark Uncles” is multidimensional, featuring a procession of wood and foam puppets wrapped in embroidered fabrics. They are based on his friends and family members—and two family dogs—with some figures holding his tapestries. The show has disparate influences, from the visual techniques of animated filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki to the layered ritualistic imagery of the horror flick *Midsommar* (2019). The title “Dark Uncles” comes from the Swiss term for doppelgängers, which Rommelaere learned of through the mysterious miniseries *The Outsider* (2019).

[Browse more available works from “Craft Figuration.”](#)

Devan Shimoyama

B. 1989, Philadelphia. Lives and works in Pittsburgh.

Though Devan Shimoyama’s large-scale mixed-media works are often self-portraits, the artist uses his own likeness to represent a broader sense of identity. “[I’m] using my body as a kind of archetypal character,” Shimoyama [told Artsy](#) last year. “I’m constructing my own invented mythology of the queer Black male.”

His portraits are fantastical reimaginations of the self, in technicolor hues made with oil, acrylic, and colored pencil and adorned with jewelry, sequins, glitter, beads, cloth, and magazine images. Some works are set in real-world settings, like the neighborhood barbershop—a nod to [Kerry James Marshall’s](#) *De Style* (1993)—while others explore mythology, as is the case when Shimoyama becomes Ganymede, abducted by Zeus in an eagle’s form. Skin is never one color, but a vibrant multicolored gradient, from warm yellow limbs to dusky midnight faces.

Like [Mickalene Thomas’s](#) rhinestone-embellished depictions of Black women, gems are used to enhance details, to draw the eye, and to comment on their use as an expression of

gender identity. “I’m looking at the way that people construct a new kind of powerful image of themselves using these synthetic materials,” Shimoyama said.

Simphiwe Ndzube

B. 1990, Cape Town. Lives and works in Los Angeles.



Simphiwe Ndzube Contact for price



Simphiwe Ndzube

The Orator, 2018

Stevenson

Contact for price

In Simphiwe Ndzube’s fantastical works, the artist breaks the boundary of the two-dimensional plane, with flat painted figures dressed in cloth garments and shoes that hang off the canvas. Spirit people, gods, and goddesses are set against colorful flattened backgrounds, often with a single majestic bird soaring overhead.

Through his works, Ndzube represents Black life in post-apartheid South Africa, but with a mythological twist. “We have the fantastical, the magical, versus the historical, the real, within one work,” he said in a 2019 video with *Vanity Fair*. “This yin and yang.”





Simpiwe Ndzube

On the Shoulder of Giants, 2018

Stevenson

Contact for price

Some characters emerge from the confines of a canvas entirely, as fully sculptural figures made of found objects, fabrics, and embellishments. Slouched at odd angles and sporting grotesque limbs, his forms are an uncanny combination of human and creature. *On the Shoulder of Giants* (2018), for example, features a human-like body with a parasol sitting atop a headless hunched beast, with a shovel for one limb and a raised tendril for another.

Ndzube creates his own lore, drawn in part from childhood stories and mixed with the South American literary tradition of magical realism.

Sophia Narrett

B. 1987, Concord, Massachusetts. Lives and works in New York.





Sophia Narrett

Whisper Like a Magnet, 2020

Kohn Gallery

Contact for price

Boundaries are nebulous in Sophia Narrett’s painterly, fairy tale–like tapestries. The compositions are rarely rectangular, but burst from the walls in colorful scenes that meld interior and exterior architecture, with characters who are often entirely uninhibited.

In the recent show “Soul Kiss,” partners couple off in wild Boschian tableaux; garden scenes are framed by oversized florals and clouds that interrupt the landscapes. In debauchorous acts of courtship with implied power dynamics, the men are clothed while the women are nude, their anatomy fully on display.



Sophia Narrett

Path, 2019

Jack Barrett

Contact for price



Sophia Narrett

Grin, 2019

Jack Barrett

Contact for price

“What does it mean when one figure is clothed and one is naked?” Narrett questioned in an interview with *Vogue*. “What does it mean when one seems to be in a position of either submission or dominance?”

Through her imagery, Narrett is using a medium long considered appropriate for women’s work as a canvas to showcase female sexuality. Using found images from the internet and reality television—including some from episodes of the reality dating show *The Bachelor*—Narrett crafts intricate works of dreamlike fantasies and desire.





Suchitra Mattai

B. 1973, Guyana. Lives and works in Denver, Colorado.



Suchitra Mattai\$16,500

What is history and what is myth? In former colonies, where the accounts of exploited laborers are often sparse and entire cultures were mined for profit, the boundaries can be unclear. Suchitra Mattai questions colonial histories and traverses personal memory through her mixed-media installations and suspended works. She often incorporates the bold patterns and colors of vintage saris, along with other objects of cultural significance. Born in Guyana, a former British colony that became home to a vast number of Indo-Caribbean laborers, she reflects on her own heritage and the larger South Asian diaspora.

In *We are Rainbows, We are Shadows* (2020), hair curlers, jute fabric, saris, and shawls become a vibrant tapestry that fans out across the wall, backlit by neon, in a joyous composition.

Other works tackle the dark history of colonialism. *The Atlantic Deep* (2019) is a found painting of the Atlantic Ocean, with Mattai's own additions of a ship sailing the waves, with bindis scattered in the sea among sections of blood-red embroidery thread. Once a simple scene of the ocean's beauty, Mattai reveals the lost voices of the laborers who were taken far from their homes.

Browse more available works from "Craft Figuration."

Christina Forrer

B. 1978, Zürich. Lives and works in Los Angeles.

Though at first glance, Christina Forrer's tapestries may look like children's illustrations, with cartoonish figures woven in bright colors, the textiles are all based on themes of conflict, anxiety, and violence. Forrer is influenced by the narrative traditions of folklore; some of its recurring antagonists, like the deceitful wolf, make appearances. Yet more often, the adversaries are other humans, or ourselves.

"From the first second we are born, conflict guides our lives," Forrer said in a video by the Swiss Institute. "I think it's what makes people do things, good or bad."



Forrer is influenced by the tapestries of German Expressionist artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Swiss artist Lise Gujer, as well as the unsettling textiles of Swedish artist Hannah Ryggen.

The Swiss-born Forrer weaves scenes of violence, hate, and jealousy—all of the emotions that fill the absence that misunderstanding and miscommunication leave behind. In the work *Gebunden II* (2020), spectral forms of family members fill the ears and mouths of figures in conflict, showing the imprint of learned behavior across generations.

Sally Saul

B. 1946, Albany, New York. Lives and works in Germantown, New York.

Though Sally Saul began taking ceramics classes in the 1980s, she has only recently received due recognition for her playful and charming clay portraiture and domestic and nature scenes. In 2019, her first retrospective, at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, surveyed three decades of her work.

Though she has rendered political and cultural figures like former president Dwight D. Eisenhower and writer Gertrude Stein in clay, Saul has said she often taps personal memory to evoke a specific time or place through her work.

Sparrows, kingfishers, a towering meditation tree, and a thick-stemmed sunflower make up her recent work on sylvan subjects. But she has created scenes of intimacy, too. In

Couple (2019), a man holds a woman close by the waist, a drink in his hand and her swaying into him in a blue dress amid small pieces of furniture and a dog. Panties (2017) is a floral pair of underwear, an object of privacy and femininity. Saul has incorporated her own personal history into her works as well, including her mother's death and the birth of her daughter.

Paloma Proudfoot

B. 1992, London. Lives and works in London.



Paloma Proudfoot injects her curvilinear, painterly ceramic shapes with a touch of the macabre, making anatomical forms that oscillate between literal and abstract, between human and alien. In her recent work Mortality is a gorgeous framework (2020), she created a body out of ceramic and melted glass, its pelvis hinged open. In The sigh, relaxing (2020), a resin arm, shoulder, and partial head are bolted together, suspended in the air by fabric. She is also one half of the artist duo Proudick, with fellow London-based ceramic artist Lindsey Mendick.

Proudfoot has combined natural materials like hair and food with her ceramics to add an element of unpredictability to her work. In her 2018 U.K. solo show at Cob Gallery, "The Detachable Head Serves as a Cup," Proudfoot told It's Nice That that she was trying to evoke "uneasiness" and "latent violence." Abstracted feminine bodies lay like corpses on purple slabs, while creature-like arms and feet are presented detached and in pairs. The

eponymous work from the show, made in 2018, comprises two forms: a mannequin-like head and neck, with a chain for a ponytail; and a second, identical head removed and flipped, as if by guillotine, and presented to the viewer as a vessel.

Browse more available works from “Craft Figuration.”

Jacqui Palumbo is a contributing writer for Artsy Editorial.

Header and thumbnail image: Klaas Rommelaere, “Portrait Klaas,” 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Zink.