

# HYPERALLERGIC

Art

## Graham Nickson's Empathic Formalism

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Carter Ratcliff 22 hours ago

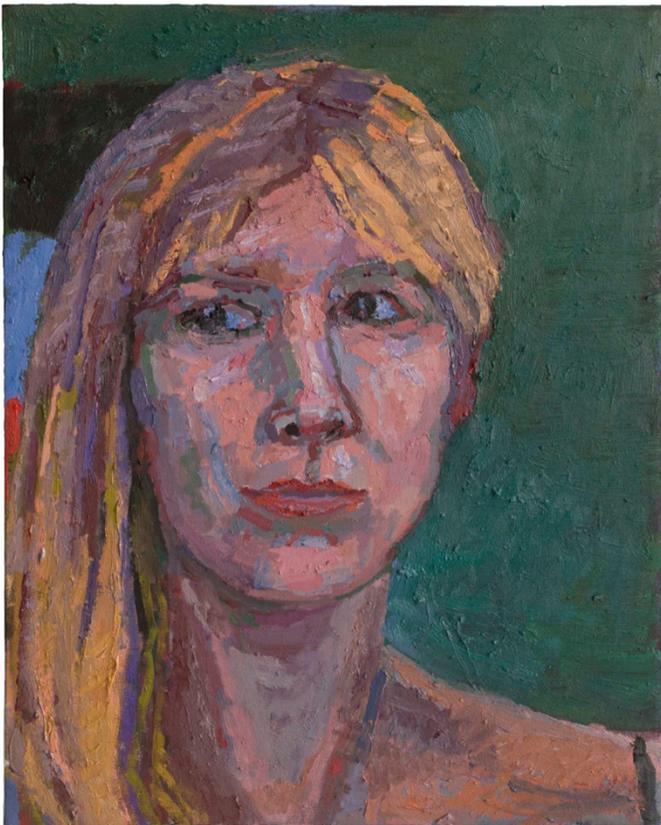


Graham Nickson, "Turtle: Bathers: Orange Chevron" (2002/2022), acrylic on primed linen, 120 x 240 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Betty Cuninghame Gallery)

Graham Nickson's paintings open onto vast stretches of imaginary terrain; and in the realm of palpable fact they claim impressive portions of wall space. "Turtle: Bathers: Orange Chevron" (2002/2022), a panoramic canvas at the heart of his recent show at Betty Cuninghame Gallery, is 20 feet wide. The 12 figures inhabiting the sandy foreground have all the elbow room they need to unfold beach chairs, perform headstands, and more. Nickson's people are always caught up in some action that makes their trim muscularity vivid. Along the painting's lower edge a woman lying on her stomach reaches back with both hands to grasp her feet; pulling hard, she converts her body into an arc. Behind her, another woman arcs in the opposite direction, raising her midriff toward the sky.

The first of these figures offers an elegant variation on the painting's lower edge; the second does the same for the upper edge. Figures to the right and left stand parallel with the vertical boundaries of the painted surface, while a man in a yellow swimsuit marks its midpoint — a function performed in concert with an orange sail. Nickson's forms are those of a formalist, a painter who does everything he can to render the structure of his imagery perspicuous. Every stance and gesture in "Large Bridge Bathers: Ritual" (1994) echoes a vertical, a horizontal, or a 45-degree angle in the scene's sparse wooden architecture. As it charts the coordinates of pictorial space, this linear play generates something richer: a livable environment. A formalist with an empath's intent, Nickson feels each beach-goer's singular way of inhabiting a place and wants us to feel it too.

Some of his people cover their faces with their hands or hide them as they remove pieces of clothing; others stand with their backs toward us. Yet each is an individual by virtue of bodily traits independent of physiognomy, never mind personality. In 2019, the Cunningham Gallery showed more than two dozen of Nickson's close-up portraits. By definition, a portrait depicts someone in particular, yet the artist has said that any likeness he produces is "a bonus." Wearing his portraitist hat, he works not face to face with a subject but "eyeball to eyeball." And it is in the eyes that he finds the chromatic key to an image. With that established, he attends to "pure sensation" while keeping his own eye as "innocent" as possible. Developing an architecture of sometimes jarring hues, he aims for what he's called a "description of form through color."



Graham Nickson, "Glancing" (2019), oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

It is possible, for an instant, to see Nickson's robustly painted faces as pure forms. An instant later, human presences assert themselves but not in the usual way. For these portraits do without the familiar means of conveying outward personalities or inward selves — no features inflected with feeling, no tilting of the head or shoulders to indicate attitude. Nickson's brushstrokes acknowledge the elasticity of skin, the solidity of the underlying bone; he gives you a sense of cartilage and tendon. One could say that he treats his sitters as objects were they not so imperatively present as people. What's powerfully felt but difficult to describe is the primal humanity of the people we meet in these portraits. Nickson evokes the vital energies that daily sociability obscures.

Some portrait painters chat with their subjects. Nickson doesn't. Isolated under his gaze, they gaze back with an intensity that promotes no connection with him or with us, the viewers. They are not alienated so much as absorbed in their utterly self-sufficient beings. Likewise, the lack of interaction between the people in Nickson's often densely populated beach scenes is not a sign of social dysfunction. It shows, rather, where the artist's interest lies: in the individual's place in a world shaped by immensities of land and water, sky and cloud — and the obvious but unacknowledged presence of other people. The vehicle for this interest is Nickson's style.

It is easy to see artists' styles as indices of their personalities and that is not entirely wrong. Still, a fully realized style is more than a mirror held up to the self. Ingres's paintings, for instance, show him to have been painstaking and confident; they also reveal how deliberately he stood apart from the world, the better to assess its appearances. Nickson gives his powerful intelligence the task of opening the way to regions of experience untouched by standard categories of thought.



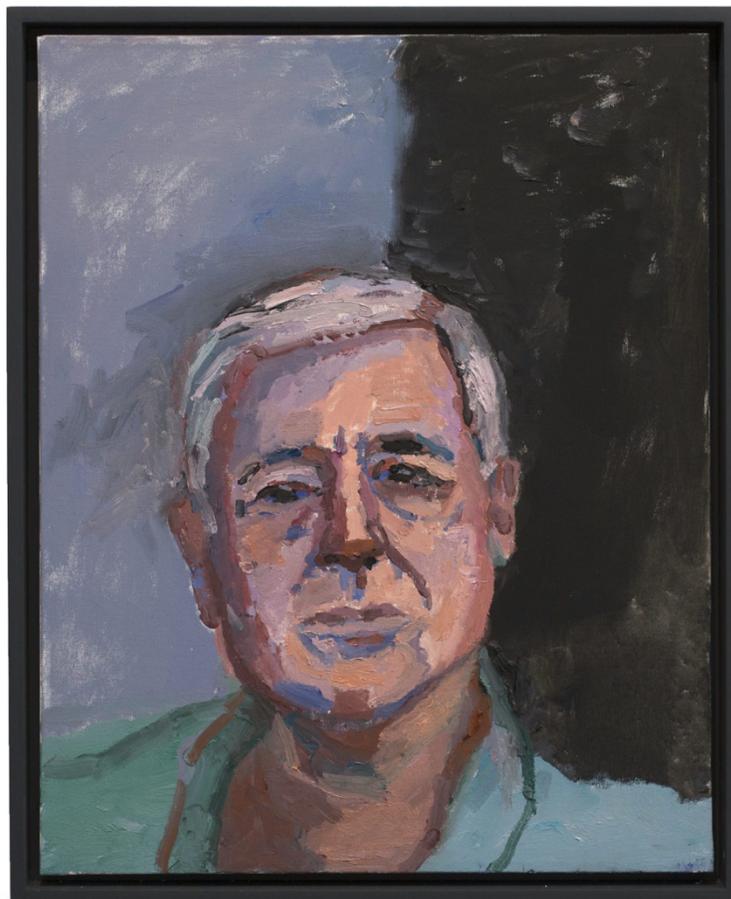
Graham Nickson, "Large Bridge Bathers: Ritual" (1994), acrylic on canvas, 93 x 159 inches

To give his paintings an aura of objective truth, Ingres smoothed his brushwork into invisibility. Nickson makes each touch of paint starkly evident. Sharpening their harmonies with dissonance, his colors are not just brilliant; they are insistent, as are his delineations of form. In his charcoal-on-paper drawings, even clouds and streaks of rain show the force of his hand. Calmly passionate about the *thereness* of all there is to be experienced, Nickson's style commemorates the world's power to acquire an immediately felt significance. He focuses on light, weather, and, above all, people because our responses to these things are as quick as they are acute. If the faces of his figures were more often visible, we might drift away on

currents of speculation about character or mood. To prevent that, Nickson persuades us to stay in the extended moment of the image, intuiting the feel of air on skin and the inward sensation of muscular effort.

“Turtle: Bathers: Orange Chevron” began life in 2002, as a painting built from black, white, and endless intermediate tones of gray. Two decades later, Nickson remade it with the full range of his richly saturated palette. The only full-color work amid the charcoal drawings and grisaille paintings in his recent Betty Cuninghame show, it looked entirely at home. Whether he works in color or black and white, the brusque refinement of his touch maintains tonal contrast at the same high pitch. Immersed in a quietly roiling atmosphere, Nickson’s preoccupied bathers carry on at water’s edge. His world abides, even as he reconfigures the landscape and populates it with new people.

Beneath this variety is the unity suggested by a 2009 statement. “Black and white and gray,” says the artist, have “implications of color” that “may be translated into the most outrageous or radical color experiences.” Thus, “I like to think I am drawing in color.” Though I don’t see those implications, I have no doubt that Nickson does, and that they originate in something I feel in all his works: a deep intuition of the world’s oneness. With sky, water, and narrow strips of land, he sets the stage for a pictorial drama — a theater of the primordial that confronts us with images of the sheer being shared by everything, human and not.



Graham Nickson, “The Observer” (2019), oil on canvas