

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Contemporary Art inspired by John Singer Sargent

Michael John Adam Mayhew
Ways of Preceiving (ADDA4023/C)
Estéfani Bouza
29th of April

Contemporary Art inspired by John Singer Sargent

John Singer Sargent (1856 - 1925) stands as one of the most influential artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, known for his virtuosity in portraiture and his captivating ability to capture the essence of his subject with stunning detail. Despite being known for his oil paintings, Sargent's contribution to drawing mediums ranges from meticulous preparatory sketches to expressive human figure studies. As a curator of a contemporary Art exhibition inspired by John Singer Sargent, this essay explores the influences of his work on present-day artists, delving into how Sargent's techniques and subject matters have inspired a new generation of drawers who engage with his legacy in creative and innovative ways, through a selection of works by contemporary artists such as Adam R. Miller, Isabella Watling and Sean Cheetham. This exhibition highlights how Sargent's influence continues to resonate in the practice of contemporary drawing.

I chose Sargent as the main staple of the exhibition because of how revolutionary he was during his generation. Sargent gathered a lot of mixed opinions during his time of creating art, "people sometimes criticised him for being too experimental." (Ascholarlyskater.com, 2017). They say his work was too sketchy and unfinished, he spent his whole career balancing being bold and inventive enough to garner attention and commission for his artwork.

Through a collection of artworks, I aim to show that the paintings, drawings of Sargent's artwork are still relevant now, and modern-day artists are now exploring his techniques and portraying them in their own way through their practice, creating stunning artworks inspired by his methods. I hope this exhibition will help those understand how influential Sargent's work is, his ability to capture beautiful artworks in his era, "portraits provide an enduring image of Edwardian Age society" (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). And inspire those who want to explore his method and techniques through my selected modern-day artists.

The curation of this exhibition is crucial in terms of how contemporary art is portrayed to modern-day audiences. The exhibition will be held in tribute to Singer Sargent's artwork, "the leading portrait painter of his generation" (Tate, 1998), exploring modern-day artists who practice his methods and create inspired artwork based on Sargent's artworks. The exhibition will feature works of Adam R. Miller (1979), Isabella Watling (1990), and Sean Cheetham (1977), offering a diverse range of skills, styles and subjects, each exploring unique themes and approaches to mediums within the theme.

Adam R. Miller is an American artist born in Oregon in 1979. A contemporary painter began an apprenticeship to Allen Jones at thirteen and sixteen. Gained recognition for his technical painting and drawing skills, *Comedia Humana* is a series of paintings based on the story of humanity. It is inspired by the Sistine Chapel, which begins with the creation and ends with the last judgement. One of the key features of Miller's distinctive style is the ability to capture the essence of portraiture and the sheer details within his paintings. His use of colours and attention to detail allow him to create these bold and inventive pieces; his attention to

anatomy is very similar to Singer's methods: "The thicker you paint, the more colour flows" (Charteris and Kitts, n.d.). These pieces give the feeling of discovery, hope and dread, given the use of dark colours surrounding the painting leads us to a sense of unknowing. Since these are larger images, I am considering placing them at the back of the mission gallery where the wall is curved and more spacious. I also plan to put them side by side so the viewer can see what planning it takes to create a painting like this one.



In the beginning

(Date unknown)

I have included another work by Miller *Persephone* (2021), "classically inspired portrait recontextualise the mythological narratives" (Artsy.net, 2020). I have selected this piece to be included because it perfectly represents what Sargent's methods and teachings could inspire someone to create. To me, Miller's *Persephone* juxtaposes with Sargent's *Madame X* (1883-84). Both paintings include very strong female poses and postures, and a distinctive palette of colour. The use of oil on canvas correlates with Sargent's painting techniques, by doing which gives the painting a very bold contrast similar to *Madame X*. I intend to include both images side by side each other so that the viewer can see that even though the paintings were made at a different time they both still hold similar values. I plan to have them next to each other in the Mission Gallery on the flat side of the walls because these are large paintings and deserve space, so the viewer would have enough room to stand back and view both images together.



Persephone

Oil on canvas
60 x 36 inches
2021



Madame X

Oil on canvas
82 1/8 x 43 1/4 inches
1883-84

Isabella Watling was born in London in 1990 and spent her early years in the UK and Australia. From 18, she trained at the Charles H. Cecil Studios in Florence, where she returns periodically to teach portrait and figure painting. Her time at the studio gave Isabella a rigorous training in sight-size portraiture, “following the tradition of masters like Van Dyck, Velázquez and Sargent” (I. Watling Painter, 2024). Isabella's portraits are painted to scale of life under natural light and always directly from the sitter. The artwork I plan to show in this exhibition is *Caterina*. My reasons for choosing this artwork are simply how similar it looks to Sargent's *Lily Millet* (1885), from the posture of the model to how the application of paint has been put onto canvas. I want to show the viewer that these methods of teaching aren't forgotten and are still being passed down to aspiring artists who want to learn the techniques.



Caternia

Date unknown

Oil on canvas

90cm x 130cm

Sean Cheetham was born in 1977 in San Francisco. He has a devoted following of collectors and art students who are inspired by his work and distinctive technique. Primarily a figurative painter, Sean is known for his technical prowess in achieving accuracy and harmony in his alla prima paintings, which he credits to a deep understanding of drawing and his system of mixing colours, which he uses adeptly to govern shadows, midtones and highlights. In addition to having an exceptional ability to understand, draw, and paint the human form. Cheetham's selection of subjects typically in familiar urban scenes contributes a truthful and often raw spirit that makes his work distinctive and a contemporary testimony of our time. For the exhibition, I have selected one of Cheetham's self-portraits. My reason for selecting one of Cheetham's self-portraits is that I believe self-portraits are a staple for any artist; it's a way to demonstrate skill, express emotion, explore identity, and even serve as a way for a remembrance record of an artist's life. Sargent was one of the first Americans to be invited to contribute a self-portrait. He approached this honour with great purpose. Sargent was not naturally self-reflective; the three self-portraits in oils that he completed were all commissions from other people. I think I will place this in one of the nooks of the mission Gallery with dim spot lighting, since it's a darker painting, the dimmer lighting would compliment it a lot and cause it to be a smaller painting compared to the other, so I want the viewers to be encouraged to discover this one.

Self portrait

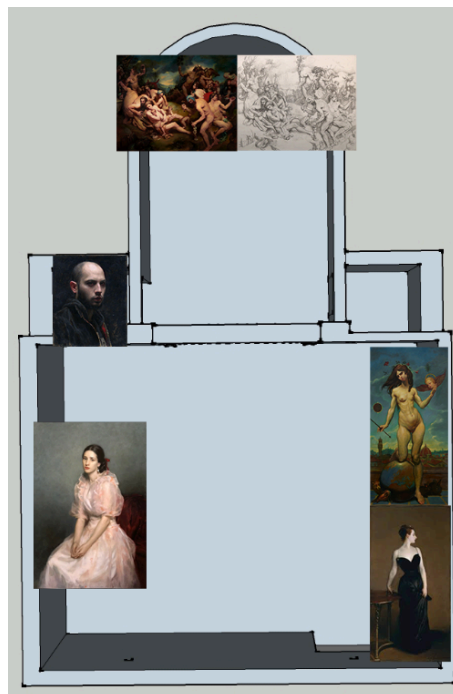
Oil on paper

10x8inch

2011



I hope this exhibition offers a unique opportunity to experience different styles and subjects of these talented artists and gain new insight into modern-day artists who still practise painting and are inspired by the old masters. I hope to inspire the new generations of painters and artists that the old methods of painting are still being used and taught.



The exhibition will be dimly lit, and spotlights will be individually directed on each painting for a dramatic effect, but also to create shadows around the images so that they have a border. I plan to keep the walls white to create a neutral, uncluttered backdrop that allows the artwork to take centre stage, as for the artwork themselves, it will be up to the artists how

they want their work to be placed onto the wall, whether it be by framing or stapled directly on the walls. I don't plan on having music play throughout the exhibition, but that may change due to how the public reacts to the artworks. But as for now, I don't plan to have music in the background.

Bibliography

- Tate (1998). John Singer Sargent 1856–1925. [online] Tate. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/john-singer-sargent-475>.
- Ascholarlyskater.com. (2017). The Appeal of John Singer Sargent – A Scholarly Skater. [online] Available at: <https://ascholarlyskater.com/2018/04/21/appeal-john-singer-sargent/> [Accessed 17 Apr. 2025].
- Encyclopedia Britannica. (n.d.). John Singer Sargent | American painter. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Singer-Sargent>.
- Charteris and Kitts, T. (n.d.). Advice on painting from john singer sargent AS EXCERPTED FROM 'JOHN SARGENT'. [online] Available at: <https://www.muddycolors.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/adviceSargent.pdf> [Accessed 19 Jan. 2022].
- Artsy.net. (2020). Adam Miller | Persephone (2020) | Artsy. [online] Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/adam-miller-persephone> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2025].
- I. Watling Painter. (2024). Bio | I. Watling Painter. [online] Available at: <https://www.isabellawatling.com/b-i-o>.