



Dureau, George (1930-2014)

by Claude J. Summers

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"Wilbert Hines" (1977) by George Dureau. Image courtesy Higher Pictures.

Artist George Dureau is best known for his male figure studies and narrative paintings in oil and charcoal and for his black-and-white photographs, which often feature street youths, dwarfs, and amputees.

He had solo exhibitions of his work at galleries and museums in Paris, London, Houston, Los Angeles, Portland, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C., among other places. He even lived in New York for several months in 1966. But he was quintessentially a New Orleanian. He was born in the city and, except for brief hiatuses, lived there his entire life.

As critic Kenneth Holditch observed some time ago, Dureau's art is "entwined with that mixture of contradictory elements that constitutes the carnal atmosphere of his native city. Perhaps this accounts to some extent for the paradoxes so distinctly a part of his best work: the joyful and painful, the beautiful and ugly, the spiritual and sensual, and most significant of all the real in sharp juxtaposition to that which is vividly imagined. Dureau looks at life in its grandeur and grossness and his keen eye and sure hand do not wink or tremble at either extreme."

Dureau was born on December 28, 1930 to Clara Rosella Legett Dureau and George Valentine Dureau and was reared by his mother, grandmother, and aunts, one of whom taught him to paint. He attended Louisiana State University, where he received a B.A. in fine arts in 1952. After serving in the United States Army, he briefly attended Tulane University, where he studied architecture. He worked as an advertising and display manager for New Orleans department stores until he was able to support himself as an artist.

Dureau was notably versatile and worked in a number of media. However, he was always a representational artist. He acknowledged the influence of such abstract expressionists as Robert Motherwell, especially in the use of color, but he steadfastly--even stubbornly--insisted on creating narrative and representational art, even when representationalism was unfashionable.

Dureau's versatility is evident in the variety of his creations, which ranged from major sculptural pieces such as the gates at the New Orleans Museum of Art and the pediment sculpture for Harrah's Casino in New Orleans to elegant posters for the Tennessee Williams Literary Festival and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. He also executed accomplished still lifes and landscapes. But his most persistent subject was the human figure, whether presented in narrative contexts, mythological fantasies, portraits and self-portraits, clothed or nude, painted or photographed.

One important part of Dureau's oeuvre is his canvases inspired by mythological figures and stories, such as *Doing the Pollaiuolo at the New Firenze* (1997) or *Three Maenads and a Centaur* (1997). In these works, usually very large paintings, the figures are intricately posed, inhabiting fully the picture plane, rhythmically interacting with each other.

Many of these paintings, such as *The Poseurs Illuminate the Eighth Deadly Sin* (1997), are frankly homoerotic. All of them tell, or at least imply, interesting, often provocative, stories. Yet they are also slyly

humorous, partly because the mythology is often potted and partly because they are presented whimsically. They might be sketches for a Mardi Gras bal masqué.

Because the mythological paintings often use the very same models Dureau used in his portraits and photographs, the classical figures are anything but remote. Indeed, in these paintings, the heroic and the grotesque, the stereotypically beautiful and the deformed easily intermingle, with the real often interrogating or challenging the idealized. The mythological figures are never only symbols of the past. While they function to connect the present to the long ago, they are always also about the here and now.

Many of the non-mythological paintings, such as *Nude Beach* (1965) or *Reception with a Waiter* (1962), also imply provocative narratives. Even a portrait such as *Black Tie to Petronius* (1970), which depicts a handsome, long-haired, languid-eyed, sensuous-lipped young man in a tuxedo, becomes a narrative by virtue of its title, which alludes to a gay Mardi Gras krewe.

Dureau's charcoal drawings and black-and-white photographs are significant contributions to homoerotic art. While they often celebrate the obvious delights of the male body with a disarming frankness, they are also able to discover beauty and dignity in unexpected places. Dureau's subjects are a motley crew, including young street people, poor white and African-American hustlers and athletes, dwarfs, and amputees.

In some cases, the series featuring Tony Brown or Otis Baptiste, for example, Dureau lovingly limns a young man's perfect physique, reveling in the heroic beauty and geometrical planes of the male figure. In others, however, such as his portraits of dwarfs or of legless young men, Dureau with the same unsentimental straightforwardness discovers dignity and beauty in them as well.

Dureau's photographs have often been compared with those of Robert Mapplethorpe. But the influence runs not from Mapplethorpe to Dureau but from Dureau to Mapplethorpe. The photographers were friends in the early 1970s, when Mapplethorpe sought out Dureau as a mentor. Mapplethorpe was greatly moved by Dureau's photographs, even to the point of restaging many of Dureau's earlier compositions.

For all their similarities, however, the photographs of Dureau and Mapplethorpe are quite different. Whereas Mapplethorpe exhibits his subjects as cool and objective, self-contained and remote icons, Dureau presents his as exposed and vulnerable, playful and needy, complex and entirely human individuals. The difference is foremost a matter of empathy.

In his photographs, as in his paintings, Dureau is not a detached observer. He conveys a deep artistic and psychological involvement with his subjects not merely as objects but also as human beings. Consequently, the photographs induce the viewer's involvement, evoking emotional as well as intellectual and aesthetic responses.

George Dureau died in his native New Orleans on April 7, 2014.

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Claude J. Summers is William E. Stirton Professor Emeritus in the Humanities and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He has published widely on seventeenth- and twentieth-century English literature, including book-length studies of E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, as well as *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall* and *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*. He is General Editor of www.glbtc.com. In 2008, he received a Monette-Horwitz Trust Award for his efforts in combatting homophobia.