

David Levine

FORUM

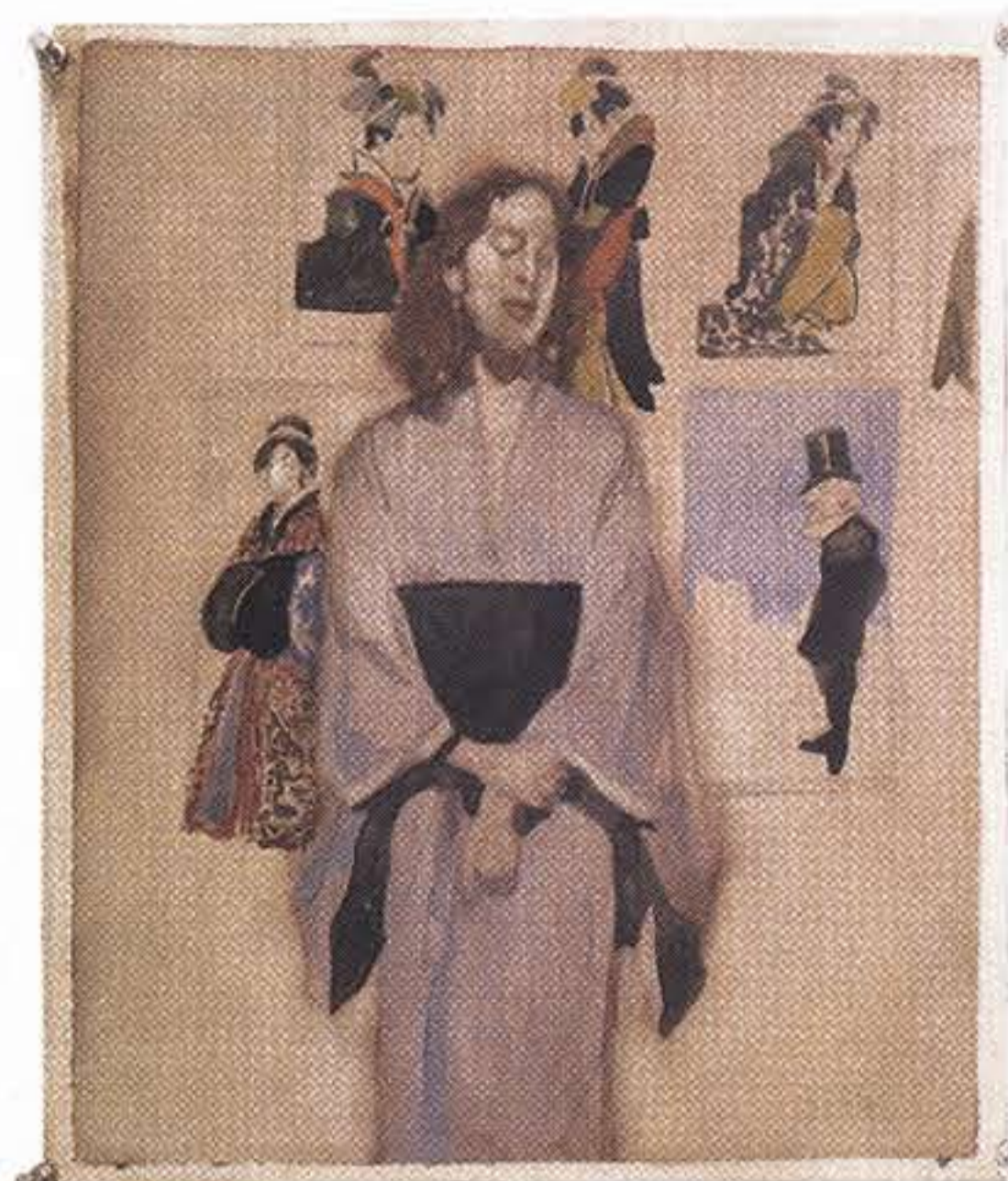
For more than three decades, David Levine's incisive and scathing caricatures have lampooned the famous and the infamous, primarily in the pages of the august *New York Review of Books*. But the artist has another, gentler side, one that sensitively and insightfully captures the fragile humanity of anonymous subjects in the luminous, painterly tradition of American forebears such as Homer and Sargent. Two shows at the Forum Gallery paid homage to Levine's awesome double-barreled talents in a generous sampling of caricatures dating back to 1969 and paintings in oil and watercolor, most of them of more recent vintage.

As Nicholas Penny notes in his catalogue introduction, the subjects of Levine's take-no-prisoners pen are often reduced to infantile activities: a smug Donald Trump balances a toylike slab of skyscraper on his shoulder; George Bush, clutching an armload of missiles, perches on Dick Cheney's knee; Bill Clinton gleefully digs into a big plate of waffles. Or his targets morph into animals—Philip Roth becomes a tweed-coated rooster, Martha Stewart lays golden eggs from a plump, feathered body, and Truman Capote sprouts slimy, amphibious limbs.

In his paintings, though, Levine captures affecting glimmers of resignation and stoic endurance, and his figures often seem to come from another era. The aging man in *A Presser* (1971) or the people in *Crowd at Ebbets Field* (1960) recall the working-class subjects of the Ashcan School, while the moody, kimono-clad woman of *Influenced* (2002–3) might have stepped straight out of a Whistler.

In his ambitious crowd scenes, such as *The Front* (2000–3) and *Water Fountain and Crowd, Coney Island* (1964–65), the sheer mechanics of depicting big groups, overlapping pattern and color, and areas of light and dark reference the great compositions of the 19th-century Salon. Levine is equally adept at depicting solitary figures, whether it's an African American embroiderer intent on her work or a pale, dreamy woman looking up from her reading to turn a bemused gaze on the viewer. In recent years, Levine has cast an eye on the melancholy city of Venice, juxtaposing its majestic architecture against groups of garishly clad tourists. Working in oil or in the tricky medium of watercolor, Levine always shows himself adept at a kind of searching, ambitious realism that transcends any sense of the shopworn or academic.

—Ann Landi



David Levine,
Influenced, 2002–3,
watercolor on paper,
14 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".
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