



*Figures in a Landscape*, 1973-73, Oil on canvas, 55 x 96 inches, ©Philadelphia Museum of Art

"Sidney Goodman is one of the preeminent contemporary American painters and draftsmen exploring the still fertile ground of art based on the human form. For over three decades the style that he has forged out of direct observation, creative imagination, and prolonged study of European and American masters has demonstrated the continuing vitality of figurative art. But Goodman's embrace of metaphor and the metaphysical has set his brand of figuration markedly apart from that of other major artists of his generation, including Philip Pearlstein, Alfred Leslie, and Alex Katz. Goodman has developed an approach that is perhaps best understood as allegorical, albeit a thoroughly contemporary version of this traditional manner not tied to mythological or biblical texts, but instead lodged in modern urban and suburban subject matter. Because the visible world provides the stimulus for Goodman's allusive inventions, the sometimes contradictory meanings of vision come into play: observation serves as the jumping-off point into a realm of visualization that often proves unsettling to familiar sight.

"Like many contemporary figurative artists, Goodman initially also explored abstract painting, which reflects the dominance of Abstract Expressionism when he was an art student in the mid- to late 1950s. These early lessons are evident in his occasional passages of color and brushwork that are only loosely tied to representation and in his concern for solidly built compositions, whose play of elements across the two-dimensional canvas is as carefully considered as the illusions of figures and space that they create.

"During the 1960s and 1970s, however, Goodman's steady commitment to representing the figure was hailed as an important alternative to abstract painting. The depth of his grounding in the history of art, from Egyptian and classical

sculpture to old master painting, is often richly apparent just beneath the surface of Goodman's familiar subjects, and makes his work equally of this moment and profoundly informed by the past. This foundation has given his work a gravity and sense of purpose that are both a virtue and a liability in an age that so highly values novelty and in which so many artists relate their works to historical sources only by parody..." "Goodman's primary interest, then, whether he uses photographs or direct observation of the world as a starting point, lies in exceeding rather than confirming the "facts" of vision. Realism in art, in contrast - as an approach rather than a specific historical movement - is generally understood as a commitment to recording the perceptual data gathered from the world of observable phenomena. Of course, no modern account of realism is so naive as to assume the possibility of perfectly replicating the visible world - as ancient accounts praised the Greek painter Zeuxis for depicting grapes so convincingly that birds flew down to eat them. We are, nonetheless, still attached to the notion that a faithful transcription of the visual information yielded by sight puts us in closer proximity to the truth. Realism seeks to hide its own process of making meaning in the hope of achieving greater authority or "truthfulness".

"Goodman, however, is at pains to insist on the image's constructed and provisional nature. Even when he takes the everyday world as his subject, it is put through a process in which its features are distorted, suppressed, or intensified in the service of expressing something beneath or behind the observable surface - that is, something that is best implied in the slippage between the recognizable and what is unexplained or mysterious.

"It is tempting to insist on Goodman's distance from the practice of realism by calling him an "anti-realist, or by reclaiming and redefining the term "superrealist" which is so narrowly identified with a slick, photographic presentation, but could be used to indicate a superseding of realism. But in the end, the most accurate perspective, and one that is richer in consequence, is to consider Goodman as a figurative artist working in an allegorical manner. Allegory as a visual mode functions in just the opposite manner of realism. Some of its strategies include disrupting narrative flow, piling up disjointed fragments, incorporating references to prior images and texts, isolating figures to emphasize their role as personifications of concepts, and using images with multiple associations to draw attention to the presence of many layers of meaning and the necessity of interpretation. All these means serve to frustrate a straightforward reception of the image, which would consume the work for the story told or for the information conveyed. Instead, an allegorical image must be grappled with: its meanings are wrought by a process of hypotheses being advanced, checked against the visual signs, refined, and advanced again until a satisfying, although not necessarily definitive, resolution is attained...

"In *Figures in a Landscape*, a man and a woman sit on either side of a child who straddles a large red Hippy-Hop ball. We recognize the artist here and correctly assume that this is his own family, although clearly not a happy one. Each figure exists in his or her own world, remote from us and each other. The emotions that the three impassive figures so resolutely conceal are nonetheless visible, as if displaced onto the surrounding environment. The slant of late daylight and the short, stop-and-go brushstrokes that organize the entire image give the landscape an unsettled, almost distressed quality. The dark sky and clouds that collide over the bowed head of the child create a brooding tone that further escalates the emotional intensity.

"At the same time, this is an image almost serene in its classical sense of structure. The woman, child, and two balls line up firmly on axis, and the horizon line, buttressed by the buildings, presents a nearly uninterrupted sweep above the figures' heads. This is no casual, slice-of life image; the pictorial elements are as carefully aligned in their own constellation as the stars and planets. The ordinariness of this scene, and its tension between imposed order and dynamic expression, create the dramatic clash between restraint and impending eruption that draws us in to speculate on a charged picture of family relationships.

"Even the title *Figures in a Landscape*, innocuous as it seems, intensifies the sense that interpretation is required to close the gap between strong feeling and incomplete narrative. The term "figure" is a most abstract designation for the human form. It accords to the three people here not much more humanity than the distinction of being separate from a ground against which they appear. The remainder of the title, "in a landscape," is also less than the informative description we might hope for - as tight-lipped as the figures themselves. Goodman's titles are generally such terse understatements as this. Affixed to highly evocative imagery as they usually are, they often come across as reverse hyperbole. Their very withholding of information urges us to project meaning into the work, as the incongruity between evidence and denial draws us to speculate. These are images that beg explanation."

- From John B. Ravenal, *Sidney Goodman: Paintings and Drawings, 1959-95*, The Philadelphia Museum of Art.