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## CHECKLIST

Claudio Bravo, Chilean, 1936–2011  
*Portrait of a Martyr*, 1972, oil on canvas  
Gift of Joachim Jean Aberbach; P.974.373

Rineke Dijkstra, Dutch, born 1959  
*Self Portrait, Marnixbad, Amsterdam*, 1991, C-print  
Purchased through the Sondra and Charles Gilman Jr. Foundation Fund and the Contemporary Art Fund in honor of Derrick R. Cartwright, Director of the Hood Museum of Art, 2000–2004; PH.2004.52

Y. Z. Kami, Iranian, born 1956  
Untitled, 1996–98, oil on linen  
Gift of Hugh J. Freund, Class of 1967; P.2002.56.1

Loretta Lux, German, born 1969  
*The Drummer*, 2004, Ilfochrome print  
Purchased through the Fund for Contemporary Photography; selected by Dartmouth College students who participated in the Hood Museum of Art seminar Museum Collecting 101: Brittany M. Beth, Class of 2006, Jillian F. Rork, Class of 2006, Bradley G. Wolcott, Class of 2006, Mukund Bhaskar, Class of 2006, Jaime L. Padgett, Class of 2007, Jessica I. Hodin, Class of 2007, Rose M. McClendon, Class of 2006, Sophia C. D. Hutson, Class of 2006, Kelly E. Baker, Class of 2006, Teresa M. Lattanzio, Class of 2009, Selena Hadzibabic, Class of 2006, Erin R. Rumsey, Class of 2006; 2006.34

Eileen Neff, American, born 1945  
*Here and There*, 2012, C-Print mounted on Plexiglas  
Purchased through the Sondra and Charles Gilman Jr. Foundation Fund and the Elizabeth and David C. Lowenstein '67 Fund; 2013.5

George Segal, American, 1924–2000  
*Girl on Red Wicker Couch*, 1973, plaster and wicker couch  
Purchased with a gift from Joachim Jean Aberbach and a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts; S.975.7

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Rineke Dijkstra, *Self Portrait, Marnixbad, Amsterdam*, 1991, c-print. Purchased through the Sondra and Charles Gilman Jr. Foundation Fund and the Contemporary Art Fund in honor of Derrick R. Cartwright, Director of the Hood Museum of Art, 2000–2004; PH.2004.52.

# Modern Melancholy



Claudio Bravo, *Portrait of a Martyr*, 1972, oil on canvas. Gift of Joachim Jean Aberbach; P.974.373. © The Estate of Claudio Bravo, courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, New York

The gaze of the melancholic turns the world to stone. Like Medusa, she drains the vitality from animated form but fills it with ambivalence and introspection, rendering the world a relic of time passed and a cause for mourning. Overcome with a sense of loss, she feels betrayed by the objects of history but clings to them in order to re-enliven them (Iversen, 56).

The medical definition of melancholy originated in ancient times with the concept of the four humors, bodily fluids that were believed to comprise the ideal temperament when equally distributed. The melancholic, with her excess of black bile, is self-absorbed, irritable, and prone to isolated contemplation. She is deeply self-conscious and understands herself to be as much a “text . . . to be deciphered” as a “project . . . to be built”; in either case, “the process of building a self

and its works is always too slow” for her (Sontag, 117). In her critical relation to herself, the melancholic also suffers severe and occasionally pathological ambivalence, as she vacillates between “depression and exaltation, unhappiness and ‘apartness,’ horror of death and increased awareness of life” (Kiblansky, 233).

From Albrecht Dürer’s *Melencolia I* (1514) to the countless current examples, this extremely fraught temperament has inspired numerous artistic renderings. And melancholy’s redemption, in fact, lies exactly within those infinitely unfolding creative and intellectual possibilities that it reveals. As Susan Sontag explains, “[The melancholic] sees ways everywhere. Cheerfully engaged in reducing what exists to rubble, [s]he positions [her]self at the crossroads” (Sontag, 132). Keenly aware of life’s transience, it is the melancholic who is best equipped to enliven it with interpretation. The artists selected for this exhibition—Claudio Bravo, Y. Z. Kami, George Segal, Rineke Dijkstra, Eileen Neff, and Loretta Lux—all give form to the melancholic condition within a contemporary context and raise questions about what distinguishes the melancholy of today. In a society of constant sensory stimulation, instant gratification, and hedonistic saturation, has

happiness itself become an obligation? Should we feel guilty about our inability to be completely satisfied with ourselves? Have we attained the object of our desire but lost the reason for its desirability (Zizek)? Through their deliberate interpretations of melancholic subjects and settings, the artists in this exhibition realize the vitality that emerges “to fill out and deny the void” when the melancholic sees opportunities everywhere to mourn this lost desire (Benjamin, 233).

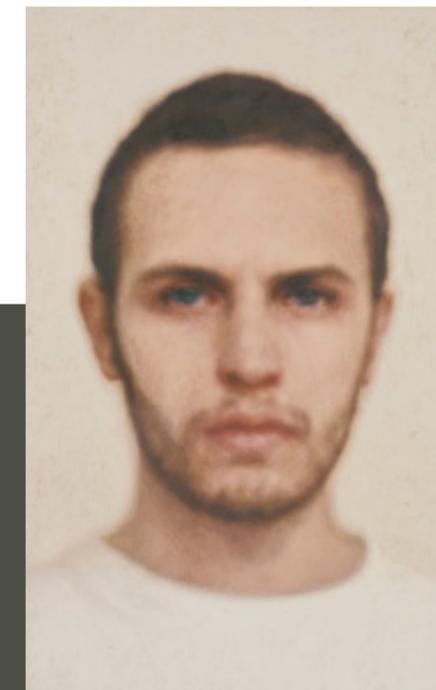
Rineke Dijkstra’s *Self Portrait* explores melancholy as a state of exile from oneself and one’s true desires (Bonney, 14). Standing before a four-by-five-inch camera, she has just emerged from an intensive swim, part of the physical therapy she must undergo following a near-fatal bicycle accident just four months prior. Completely worn out by this exercise, Dijkstra presents the uncomfortable moment when physical exhaustion overtakes social decorum. Yet the image does not pretend to candor; its careful symmetry and clinical palette betray the moments of meticulous planning and cool stylization that led up to the click of the lens. The gridded, boxlike setting compresses Dijkstra’s body and emphasizes her isolation. Its oppressive stagnancy also stands in tension with the duration of time that this image seems to encapsulate, exacerbating the discomfort of her melancholy and its epic self-consciousness. Dijkstra uses photography to objectify and communicate her feelings of pain and fatigue, demonstrating in turn that “the deep transactions between the melancholic and the world always take place with things (rather than with people)” (Sontag, 120). She paradoxically creates a relic of her experience, then, in the hopes of enlivening it.

In *Portrait of a Martyr*, Chilean artist Claudio Bravo metaphorizes martyrdom as a melancholic experience. Bravo coincides with the photorealist movement in Western art, and while he insists on painting after a live model, this work’s pristine surface and hyper-real level of detail sucks the air out of an otherwise timeless and spatially ambiguous scene and replaces it with a fatal stillness. In fact, Bravo appears to have secularized the old master painting theme of the Resurrection, applying a deadpan approach to an otherwise emotionally charged scene. While the skull also serves as a *memento mori*, its juxtaposition in a symbolic triangle that also includes the martyr’s lifeless body and stiffened flag reinforces the thematic tension between mortality and immortality. On the other hand, Bravo’s brilliant treatment of light emphasizes the physical presence of these objects and commands a tactile response in the viewer. This “vitalism rooted in mortalism” characterizes the ambivalent condition of the melancholic, who fluctuates between the exaltation of life’s decay and a mournful sense of betrayal by history (Sarafianos, 13). The particularities of the model’s face remove the scene from a religious context and convey “overt homoeroticism . . . and even sacrilege”; there is thus an inescapable guilt left here to befall the complicit spectator (Hood Museum of Art, 66). This potential for guilt and melancholy resurrects the painted figure in the same way that martyrdom resurrects a lifeless body. The painting represents a melancholic experience by encouraging “multiple and contradictory readings, to clue its viewers to an endless exegetical labor until, exhausted in the end, they discover their own portrait [in the face of the martyr] . . . Interpreting the [painting] becomes a detour for self-reflection” (Sontag, 112). By partaking in this process, the viewer counteracts the theme of death by enlivening the work with her own creative interpretation of melancholy.

George Segal’s *Girl on a Red Wicker Couch* is an “assembled environment,” in the words of the artist, meant to be approached as though one were in the presence of a real woman. Segal seeks to confound viewers with contradictory feelings of intimacy and estrangement. This woman is both eroticized and ossified, and the mournful stillness of the work’s atmosphere offers an ambivalent experience to the viewer, who finds herself as melancholic as the isolated, lifeless, and objectified female herself. On the other hand, Loretta Lux’s digitally altered photograph *The Drummer* exemplifies nostalgic melancholy by encouraging an unrealistic longing for the past and childhood. She further frustrates this longing by refusing to engage the viewer with narrative and subsequently isolating her in her longing much as she isolates the child within the frame. Y. Z. Kami also conforms to the visual trope of the solitary figure as a melancholic character in his untitled portrait of a possible AIDS victim. Painted during the heart of the AIDS crisis in New York, the blurry anonymity of the portrait conveys the government’s de-individualization of victims into statistics. While Lux’s image provokes solitary introspection, Kami’s portrait, painted after a photograph, confounds and frustrates the viewer with its simultaneous specificity and blurry anonymity. Kami intensifies this vacillation by associating his works with the encaustic Fayum mummy portraits, which feature similarly disembodied figures in ambiguous space. Like these funerary portraits, the unidentified male’s presence appears timeless, like a painted memory in a perpetual process of decay.

Eileen Neff’s gigantic photograph titled *Here and There* is a contemporary still-life, the strewn objects of which are arranged in what appears to be a precious box set into the wall. Drawing upon the notion that “reminiscences of self are reminiscences of a place” (Sontag, 112), the room and its scattered elements call out to the viewer as the traces of a human once present. Neff fills the enormously vacant scene with a melancholic reflection upon the passage of time, emphasizing the decaying remnants that we leave behind us. However, she expresses the melancholic’s mourning while nevertheless occluding the source of her desire to mourn by applying to the photograph such an impressive, highly saturated finish.

In *Here and There*, Neff gives us relics without telling us why to want them. Modern melancholy operates in precisely the same way, providing us with meaningful objects while stripping away the motivations for their meanings. Yet melancholy does not sever ties with the ruins of human experience; it attaches itself to objects “in order to redeem them,” sacrificing the physical world in pursuit of its own interpretation, which will, in the end, enliven it (Benjamin, 157).



Y. Z. Kami, Iranian, *Untitled*, 1996–98, oil on linen. Gift of Hugh J. Freund, Class of 1967; P.2002.56.1.

Jane Cavalier '14,  
Class of 1954 Intern