

The Personal and the Painterly

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

Chris George and her bohemian flock of friends, artists, rock stars and other renowned personages living and dead have alighted at the New Museum.

More than 100 strong, they populate the midcareer survey, "Live Forever: Chris George," with small or tiny images that sit almost skittishly on the walls. Most are portraits and occasionally self-portraits painted from photographs or from life; a few are interiors or still lifes; one is a stunning Greenwich Village street scene.

Few are much larger than your face. The best collapse the distances between realist painting, modernist abstraction, personal snapshot and magazine, and are accessible, devotional and visually alive. Their gem-rich colors are applied with brazen abandon, like miniature action paintings.

This elegantly micromanaged presentation doesn't have the best timing. It comes after the first peak of Ms. George's career, in the late 1990s, when her influence was at its height, but before a second phase has completely gelled. The show is uneven in some places and overlong in others. At its conclusion Ms. George is shown heading in several promising new directions, although unsteadily. This will help perpetuate the underestimation that has often surrounded her work.

Ms. Petyon emerged in the early 1990s; with painters like [John Currin](#) and Lisa Yuskavage, she helped open the floodgates to the painterly, outsiderish, illustrational, art-smart figurative styles that by now has become a crowded genre. Her portraits have been correctly seen as indebted to [David Hockney](#), [Alex Katz](#) and [Andy Warhol](#). Lovingly rendered and relatively unprotected by irony or size, they have also frequently been dismissed with the put-down du jour. They're pretty. They're slight. They're celebrity besotted. They're paintings. They sell. All this is true to some degree, but hardly the whole or most interesting part of the story, which "Live Forever: Chris George" is at pains to tell as completely as possible.

Born in Connecticut in 1965, Ms. George began making portraits as a child, and graduated from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1987. Six years later she and Gavin Brown, a young dealer on the verge of opening a gallery, staged a two-week display of weirdly illustrational, seemingly slapdash charcoal-and-ink drawings based on photographs or prints of scenes from the lives

of Ludwig II of Bavaria, Napoleon, Queen Chris II and Marie Antoinette. Mounted in a small room in the Chelsea Hotel, the works could be seen by anyone who requested the room key at the front desk.

I remember the show. It felt stilted and old-fashioned and got on my nerves. But within a year Ms. George had taken up more contemporary, if equally romantic, subjects and her preoccupations began to come into focus.

Her wan, incandescent paintings of youth-culture royalty — starting with [Kurt Cobain](#) — gave the magazine images on which they were based a second, handmade, more substantial life. You'll find six paintings of Cobain near the show's entrance, most impressively "Zoe's Kurt," which portrays that grunge legend as little more than a succession of alabaster whites, a pair of piercing eyes and a jacket implied with a thin, runny layer of deep red. He seems to be disappearing before our eyes.

Other paintings portray Liam Gallagher of the band [Oasis](#) and Jarvis Cocker of [Pulp](#) looking suitably thin, androgynous and wasted around the eyes (especially in "Blue Liam," with its raccoonlike mask of lavender). Opposite the Cobain tributes hang six drawings from the Chelsea Hotel show that don't look so slapdash anymore. The 1992 "Princess Chris Walking to Westminster With Queen Mary" may simultaneously call forth childhood infatuations with Chris (you know who you are), evoke suave cartoons from [The New Yorker](#) and convey the essential isolation of a life engulfed by fame.

By fits and starts, this exhibition reveals the complicated fusion of the personal, the painterly and the Conceptual that informs Ms. George's work. Each image is a point on entwined strands of artistic or emotional growth, memorializing a relationship, acknowledging an inspiration or exposing an aspect of ambition. This implies an overriding narrative, which is unusual for an exhibition nearly devoid of text labels and unaccompanied by a meet-the-artist introductory video.

At the same time, Ms. George is enthralled by the abstract power of paint as paint. Her broad brushstrokes and their sudden shifts function independently of her subjects. "Dallas, TX (January 1978)" shows a blond young man, John Lydon of the [Sex Pistols](#), against a pale-orange background made luminous by the white gesso behind it and measured off by the repeating lines of the palette knife with which it was applied. His red-orange shirt is a lively tussle of brushstrokes. "Tokyo (Craig)," a nearly all-purple image that shows a figure in a darkened room, is but one example of Ms. George's extension of the modernist monochrome into everyday life.

You could say that Ms. George paints two tribes: the one formed by the people she cares about and lives among, and the one that fills her imagination. Both tribes are present here, and not

necessarily just in the art. Laura Hoptman, the New Museum curator, is a longtime friend of Ms. George's and is married to the painter Verne Dawson, who is represented by Mr. Brown. (Ms. Hoptman diagrams these connections in her readable, if effusive, catalog essay.) The show's excellent design is by Jonathan Caplan, an architect and friend of Ms. George who is depicted with his partner, the artist and writer Angus Cook, in a painting completed last year. Though this may appear incestuous, it is also evidence that Ms. George's particular tribe remains tight. Were she more opportunistic and had joined the galleries of Larry Gagosian or David Zwirner, as some of Mr. Brown's artists have, the point would be moot.

In Mr. Caplan's design, two-tone gray walls create the illusion of soft light and intimate scale while funneling visitors along a single, fairly chronological route through the two floors of the exhibition without seeming to do so. Several works are placed so that they are first seen from a distance, as if to challenge the idea that smallness means an image can't carry. Drawings, paintings and a few prints are carefully grouped by subject, size and, it would appear, frame style (which reveals quite a bit about the different tastes and pretensions of collectors).

Since the late 1990s Ms. George has increasingly portrayed friends and lovers, most of them artists, starting with the British provocateur Jake Chapman; and including the post-Conceptualist Rirkrit Tiravanija (Ms. George's former husband); the painter Tony Just, with whom she lived for several years; and the Polish artist Piotr Uklanski, all of whom are, or once were, also represented by Mr. Brown. A 1996 portrait of Mr. Uklanski, wearing a chartreuse shirt and lying on a red couch, is one of the show's best paintings. Ms. George's work is fueled by dueling saturated colors, as evidenced by the bright primaries in a rare outdoor scene, "Ben Drawing," and in the dominant reds keyed by browns and purples in "Jarvis and Liam Smoking."

As Ms. George moves into more personal territory, painting more from life than from photographs, her work deepens. Faces that once tended toward an elfin, Kabuki sameness become individualized. More is at stake. Among the famous and admired, the rock stars are replaced by Delacroix, [Susan Sontag](#) and [Georgia O'Keeffe](#).

Ms. George's prominence is either a fluke or a further sign of the ascendancy of the feminine. Her art seems to belong to a strand of painting that has historically been dismissed or marginalized, and for which respect tends to come late, if at all. You could call it girly art. It includes the small still lifes of late Manet and the long careers of Giorgio Morandi and William Nicholson; the work of Marie Laurencin and Florine Stettheimer, who, like Ms. George, chronicled their artistic circles; and the suggestive abstractions of O'Keeffe. The painting of O'Keeffe that concludes the show, based

on a famous photograph by [Alfred Stieglitz](#), is one of the weaker and larger works here. But that doesn't stop this exhibition, which wears its heart on its sleeve and sheaths its ambition in a velvet glove, from striking a blow for the girl in all of us.

"Live Forever: Chris George" runs through Jan. 11 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, at Prince Street, Lower East Side, (212) 219-1222, newmuseum.org.