

# Early Risers

These artists have the talent, perseverance and burning ambition it takes to succeed.

PHOTOS BY JULIANA SOHN

**W**hen painter Lisa Ruyter, one of a new generation of emerging artists, learned that Leo Koenig wanted to exhibit her work at his TriBeCa gallery, she was determined that it generate some buzz.

"It was going to be my most important show in New York," says Ruyter, 33. "People knew me from all over Europe, but they didn't know me so well here. I really wanted this show to have an impact."

It did. Ruyter's painted a series of graveyard canvases, which piqued collectors' interest. The February show at Koenig sold out—with prices from \$5,000 to \$30,000—and she picked up additional representation in European galleries as a result.

Ruyter, who had been painting acerbically colored neo-Pop landscapes based on her own photographs of suburban scenes, says she tried to inject more



From left: Lisa Ruyter, Will Cotton, Rachel Feinstein and Slater Bradley, photographed at Cotton's studio on New York's Lower East Side.

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“What lies at the center of the works is temptation, indulgence and self-denial,” says Will Cotton of his treacherous scenes. Yet his surreal landscapes are infused with a sense of irony.

intellectual rigor into the genre. “I wanted to take it to another place,” she says. The resulting paintings of cemeteries included Pere Lachaise in Paris where painters and writers such as Fernand Leger and Marcel Proust are buried.

Ruyter’s career trajectory wasn’t always so smooth. After earning an MFA at New York’s Hunter College, she moved to Washington, D.C., where she hoped to open a gallery. But the gallery never got off the ground, so Ruyter moved back to New York, where she worked in the public-relations office of Ellen Jacobs, and began making her own art in earnest.

Ruyter has recently come off a series of sold-out solo shows in Berlin, Vienna, Brussels and Geneva. She works so quickly—painting about 30 canvases a year—that she says she barely has time to absorb the images. “I don’t know what my paintings are like until a couple of years after I make them,” Ruyter admits. “It’s very nostalgic.”

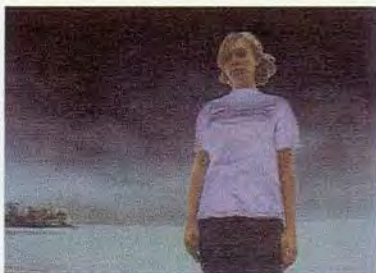
While Ruyter is painting at a good time—the medium was almost left for dead a decade ago—she has little praise for the work of her contemporaries. “I

think painting is so cheap and low,” she says. “I don’t think it’s highbrow at all. Coming from school, painting was the thing the stupid kids did. The smart kids made installations and video work and photo-based work.”

Ruyter considers her work, with its narrative structure, more closely related to photography and filmmaking than to the tradition of painting, which is perhaps the reason she feels free to criticize it. “I find more ideas in the way people look and talk about film,” she says, “than in the way they look and talk about paintings.”

Slater Bradley might tend to agree, but he goes one step further, rejecting anything static or one-dimensional. “Just three seconds of somebody moving on videotape could make me cry,” he says, “whereas looking at a photo did nothing for me. This medium, video, had a lot of power.”

Bradley’s attention-getting, first New York solo show, “Charlatan,” at Team Gallery last year, featured four videos, including *Female Gargoyle*, which captured a woman’s startling attempt to commit suicide as she straddles a building’s parapet. Friends alerted Bradley to the scene as it was



Top: Will Cotton’s *Custard Mountain*, 2001, oil on linen. Above: A video still from Slater Bradley’s *The Laurel Tree (Beach)*, 2000. Right: A still from Bradley’s video *Female Gargoyle*, 2000.



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Left: Rachel Feinstein's *Fat Friend*, 2000, mixed media; Feinstein's *Yesterday*, 2000, enamel on wood.

“She changed my life,” says Rachel Feinstein of her sculpture teacher, Judy Pfaff. “She was the one who said you can make art out of garbage.”

unfolding in New York's East Village.

“That was the most amazing sequence I'll ever shoot,” says Bradley, whose work explores the media and how it manipulates the public's emotions.

Bradley last year put actress Chloë Sevigny, an old friend, in his video *The Laurel Tree (Beach)*. Standing on a stormy beach, Sevigny recites the opening line, a quote from a Thomas Mann short story on dilettantism: “What more pitiable sight is there than a life led astray by art?”

The 26-year-old San Francisco native first became interested in art when he was 16 but didn't focus on it right away because he was good at other things. Shortly after his parents gave him a video camera one Christmas, he went off to UCLA, where studying with California luminaries such as Paul McCarthy and Charlie Ray led him to choose his present profession.

Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, a gallerist and independent curator, decided to include *Female Gargoyle* in a show at Ghent's Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, a museum in a former convent, also known as SMAK, in October. “Of the 60 artists in the show, he's the only one showing in the chapel,” says Rohatyn. “He's making art that is completely on the edge.”

If Bradley's work is edgy, Will Cotton's falls at the other extreme. The 35-year-old painter from New Paltz, New York, employs an unusual method: He bakes and frosts cakes, which become the building blocks of intricate dioramas. Cotton then photographs the surreal, sugary landscapes and uses the pictures as references for his paintings.

Cotton's sweet scenes, however, are also infused with a sense of irony. “What lies at the center of the works is temptation, indulgence and self-denial,” the artist says.

While Cotton had won fans prior to his pastry paintings, the reaction to his previous series on toys such as Mickey Mouse was not as strong. “I was feeling a bit lost with the toys because they were other people's images,” he says. “With these paintings, I make my own world.”

And collectors apparently couldn't resist it. His last two shows at the Mary Boone Gallery, in February 2000 and March 2001, were both sellouts.

Cotton, who cites references such as the Baroque period, the Hudson River School and commercial product photography, decided to be a painter after a high-school art teacher took him to see an Edward Hopper exhibit. After training at Cooper Union College and the Beaux Arts in Rouen, France, Cotton moved back to New York in 1986. His did construction work to support himself and plugged away at his art for more than a decade before Boone plucked him from obscurity.

Sculptor Rachel Feinstein landed on the art world's radar screen in 1999 thanks to her first two solo shows, at New York's White Columns and



London's Robert Prime Gallery. As a worthy follow-up, she was included in some of last year's bigger sampler shows. But unlike Cotton, who paints according to a master plan, Feinstein delights in being spontaneous.

“I love the haphazardness of art,” says the 30-year-old sculptor as she lies on a couch in her studio. “I love when things go wrong. When something turns out the way you expect it to, it's just boring.”

Feinstein combines wood, denim, rhinestones, velvet and rope for an effect that is sensual and hip. *Yesterday*, for example, is a brightly painted, three-dimensional, wood-on-wood inlay abstract interpretation of an 18th-century Bavarian porcelain figurine. The piece received good notices when it was shown at last year's prestigious Statements at the Basel Art Fair.

Feinstein, who grew up in Miami, fled what she describes as that city's dearth of culture for the Rhode Island School of Design summer program after her senior year in high school. At Columbia University, Judy Pfaff, her sculpture teacher, “changed my life,” says Feinstein. “She was the one who said you can make art out of garbage. I had never taken the jump from Renoir to Contemporary Art.”

A few minutes into the interview, Feinstein's husband, the well-regarded painter John Currin, bare-chested and wearing paint-splattered khakis, knocks on the door of her studio and bursts in. He asks Feinstein if she wants to accept a weekend invitation to the Hamptons. It may be the only break Feinstein gets for months. Her packed fall schedule includes solo shows at the Marianne Boesky Gallery and Sotheby's Atrium Gallery and inclusion in the “Young Americans” show at London's Barbican Centre.

“I might hemorrhage doing it all,” Feinstein says. “We'll see.”

—LOUISE LEPORE



Left: Lisa Ruyter's *Our Town*, 2000, acrylic on canvas. Above: Ruyter's *The Grass Arena*, 2000, acrylic on canvas.