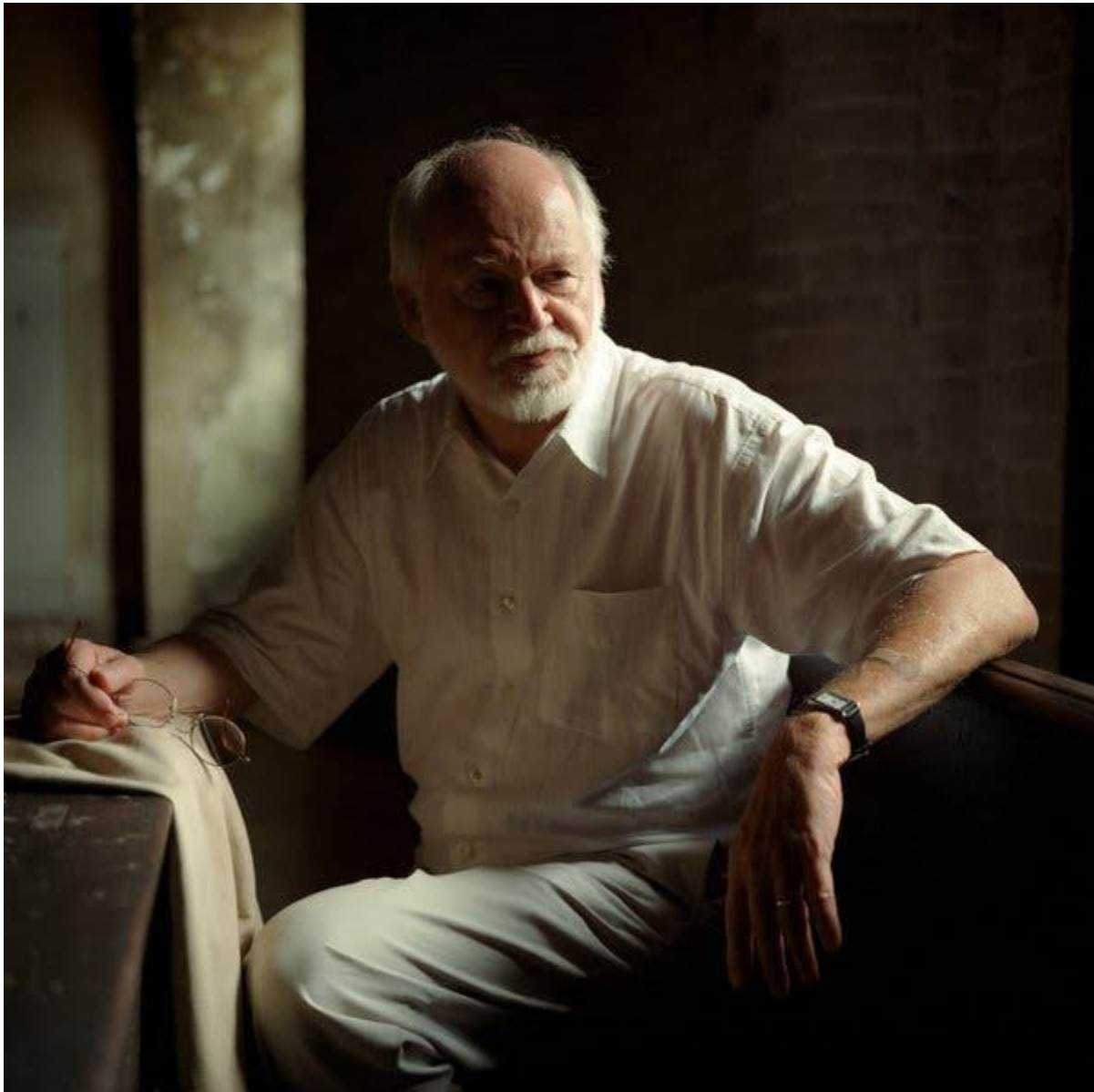


William Bailey, Modernist Figurative Painter, Dies at 89

He swathed his nudes and still lifes of eggs, vases, bottles and bowls in a breathless, deceptively serene atmosphere heavy with mystery.



The painter William Bailey in 2009. He was never given a career survey in a major museum, but his influence, particularly on students at Yale, was deep. Credit...Ford Bailey

By William Grimes

April 18, 2020

William Bailey, whose pristine, idealized still lifes and female nudes made him one of the leading figures in the return of figurative art in the 1980s, died on April 13 at his home in Branford, Conn. He was 89.

His death was confirmed by his daughter, Alix Bailey.

Beyond his painting, Mr. Bailey influenced generations of students in his many years as a teacher at the [Yale School of Art](#).

In some of his best-known work, Mr. Bailey arranged simple objects — the eggs, bowls, bottles and vases that he once called “my repertory company” — along a severe horizontal shelf, or on a plain table, swathing them in a breathless, deceptively serene atmosphere heavy with mystery.

His muted ochres, grays and powdery blues conjured up a still, timeless world inhabited by Platonic forms, recognizable but uncanny, in part because he painted from imagination rather than life.



Mr. Bailey's "L'Attesa" (2006). His female figures are disconcertingly impassive, implacable and unreadable. Credit... William Bailey/Betty Cuninghame Gallery

"They are at once vividly real and objects in dream, and it is the poetry of this double life that elevates all this humble crockery to the realm of pictorial romance," Hilton Kramer wrote in *The New York Times* in 1979.

Mr. Bailey's female figures, some clothed in a simple shift or robe and others partly or entirely nude, are disconcertingly impassive, implacable and unreadable, fleshly presences breathing an otherworldly air.

The critic Mark Stevens, writing in Newsweek in 1982, credited Mr. Bailey with helping to “restore representational art to a position of consequence in modern painting.”

But his version of representation was entirely idiosyncratic, seemingly traditional but in fact “a modernism so contrarian,” the artist Alexi Worth wrote in a catalog essay for the Betty Cuninghame Gallery in 2010, “that it feels, despite its historical sophistication, almost like a brand of outsider art.”

William Harrison Bailey was born on Nov. 17, 1930, in Council Bluffs, Iowa. His father, Willard, worked in radio advertising and moved the family from city to city in the Midwest. Bill was in his early teens when his father died. His mother, Marjorie (Cheyney) Bailey, was a homemaker who later worked as an accountant for her second husband, Fred Baker, who ran a business training investigators.

June 7, 1982 / \$1.50
Newsweek

Art Imitates Life

The Revival of Realism



A revival of interest in figurative painting in the early 1980s propelled Mr. Bailey to the cover of Newsweek, which chose his seminude "Portrait of S" to epitomize the trend. Shocked retailers across the country pulled the magazine from their shelves.

Mr. Bailey studied art at the University of Kansas but left before graduating and enlisted in the Army. He saw combat as a platoon sergeant in Korea and later served in Japan.

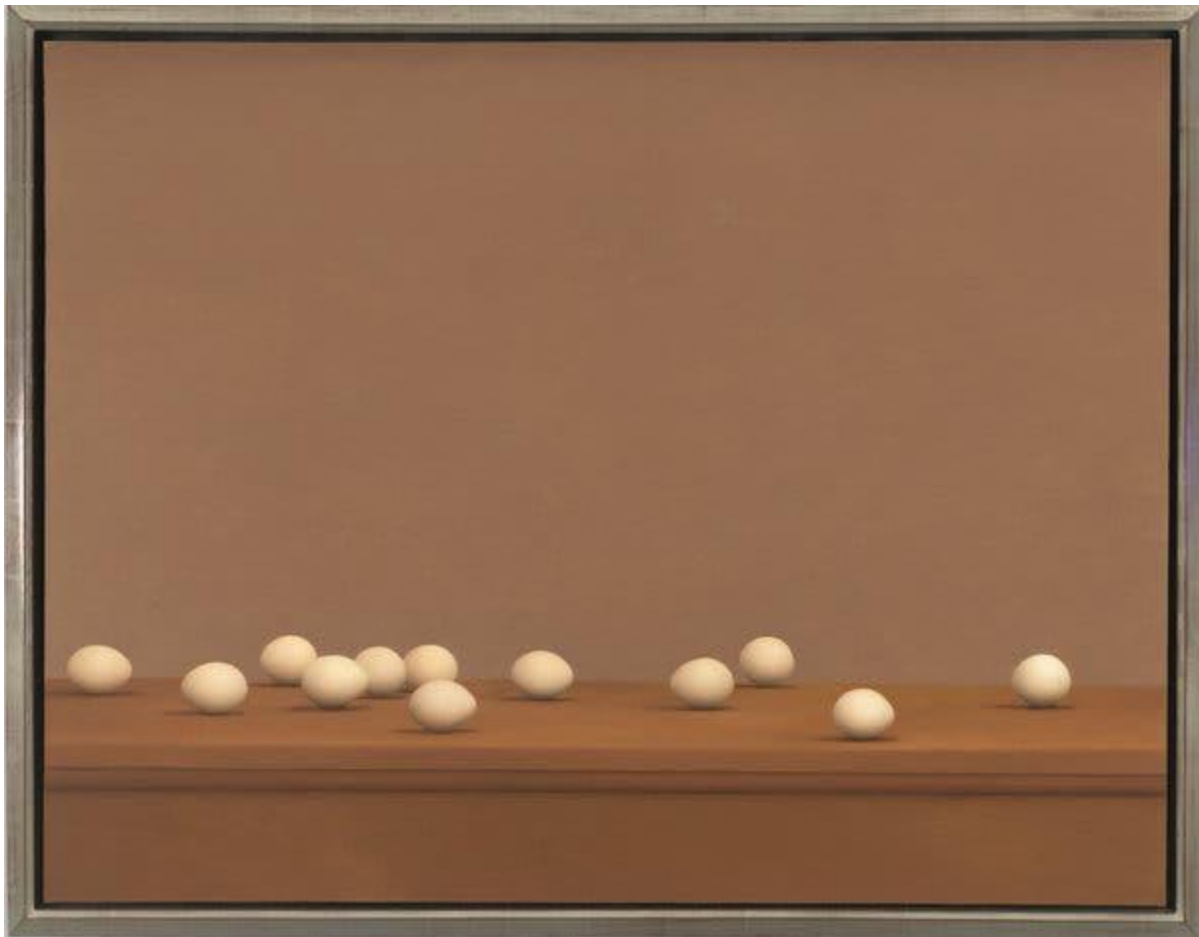
On returning to the United States, he enrolled in Yale University's art school, where he studied with the abstract painter [Josef Albers](#). He earned a bachelor of fine arts degree in 1955 and a master's degree two years later.

In 1958 he married Sandra Stone, a fellow Yale student who paints under her maiden name. In addition to her and his daughter, he is survived by a son, Ford, and five grandchildren.

Mr. Bailey remained at Yale as a teacher of drawing and painting until 1962, when he accepted a teaching position at Indiana University. He returned to Yale as a tenured professor in 1969 and taught there until 1995, a period when Yale gained recognition as one of the premier art programs in the United States.

“When we come to look at the artists influenced by him and his way of seeing, we see some of the more prominent names of the late 20th century,” said Mark D. Mitchell, a curator at the [Yale University Art Gallery](#). The names include [Nancy Graves](#), [Richard Serra](#), [Rackstraw Downes](#), [Sylvia Mangold](#), [John Currin](#) and [Lisa Yuskavage](#).

On Mr. Bailey's visits to Italy, France and Greece, his encounters with Greek sculpture and the cool classicism of painters like Piero della Francesca and Ingres proved decisive. “When my work changed around 1960, I was thinking, “There's so much noise in contemporary art. So much gesture,” [he told Yale News in 2010](#). “ I realized it wasn't my natural bent to make a lot of noise, and I'm not very good at rhetorical gesture.”



“Eggs” (1974). Mr. Bailey’s version of representation was idiosyncratic, seemingly traditional but in fact, a fellow artist wrote, a contrarian form of modernism. Credit...William Bailey/Betty Cuninghame Gallery

Reacting to a colleague who proposed the egg as the ultimate example of pure, simplified form, Mr. Bailey painted an egg on a shelf, then two, seeing rhythmic possibilities. A dozen of them appear in the 1974 painting “Eggs.” Before long the eggs were sharing space with cups, bowls and vases. Although his studio was filled with these props, Mr. Bailey painted entirely from memory.

He had his first solo show at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery in Manhattan in 1968. In 1970 he was included in a major survey, “Twenty-two Realists,” at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Interest in figurative painting gathered steam, propelling Mr. Bailey to the cover of Newsweek, which in 1982 chose the semi-nude “Portrait of S” (1979-80) to epitomize the trend. Proving that the bourgeoisie could still be shocked, retailers across the country pulled the magazine from their shelves, although newsstand sales of Newsweek doubled in Manhattan. Feminists saw something like bondage in the dress straps that held the subject’s arms close to her body.

Mr. Bailey, who always spoke of his work in purely formal terms and rejected the label “realist,” was aghast. “I admire painters who can work directly from nature, but for me that seems to lead to anecdotal painting,” he once said. “Realism is about interpreting daily life in the world around us. I’m trying to paint a world that’s not around us.”



“Turning” (2003). Mr. Bailey called the simple objects in his still lifes — eggs, bowls, bottles and vases — “my repertory company.”Credit...William Bailey/Betty Cuninghams Gallery

Like the Italian still life painter [Giorgio Morandi](#), one of his heroes, Mr. Bailey pursued his ideas single-mindedly, playing variations on his arranged objects and female figures throughout his career. He was never given a career survey in a major museum, but last year the Yale University Art Gallery mounted a retrospective, “William Bailey: Looking Through Time.”

A survey of his drawings was scheduled to open at the New York Studio School last month but was put on hold because of the coronavirus pandemic.