

Lise Soskolne – Humour Then

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The following texts have been written by Lise Soskolne on the occasion of the exhibition at Kunstverein Nürnberg – Albrecht Dürer Gesellschaft.

Humour Now

This painting was made in 2005 in a day or two using paint trim rollers instead of paintbrushes. A roller is more efficient than a brush at moving oil paint around large areas and it blends color more seamlessly. The text, *Humour Now*, was added a few days later on impulse by conflating two words from the source material, *humo* and *amour*. The source material came from a 2005 Google image search for “michel houellebecq”, the French writer. A few pages into the search results I found a digital flier for a literary event in Belgium in 2000 called *Saint Amour*. It depicted shards of light shooting out of a cube-shaped reading chair set against a red background. Now referred to as “the Rolls-Royce of literary evenings,” *Saint Amour* included Houellebecq along with the “love, lusty or loving words” of seven other writers. After I made *Humour Now* I began searching the term “mort d’amour”. One day I searched “mort d’amour” with “chairs” and found the image *Humour Then* was made from in 2006. Today, twenty years after the *Saint Amour* literary event in 2000, the top search result for “saint amour michel houellebecq” is the 2016 film, *Saint-Amour*, starring Gérard Depardieu as Jean, and Michel Houellebecq as The Owner of the Guest House. *Humour Now* was exhibited at Kimberly-Klark (NY) in 2018 and then again at The Mishkin (NY) in 2019.

Two Heads

This image comes from *Planète (The Planet)*, a French fantastic realism magazine produced by Jacques Bergier and Louis Pauwels between 1961 and 1972. I found *Planète* at Strand Books in the Foreign Language section, but once in a while an issue would also appear in Small Books because of its odd size, about 6” x 6”. *Two Heads* was completed without struggle or error in one day in 2002 during a challenging period of transition. I was trying to get back to representational painting and mark-making after six years of not working with images or paint brushes, so with the success of *Two Heads*, *Planète* magazine took on mythical status for me. Convinced it was the key to the future of successful image production, the search for more issues in used bookstores took up more time than I was spending in the studio—I was addicted. After finding only three I went to the New York Public Library and photocopied pages from their collection. Somehow the paintings never seemed to work. I expanded the search to include any small books, foreign books, trade journals, joke books, psychology illustrations, and advertising. These replaced *Planète* and produced better results. The problem with *Planète* was that its illustrations were already too much like paintings. Painting from fantastic realism just produced more fantastic realism, which wasn’t what I was after. The image that became *Two Heads* has a French-language caption. It says, *Un + un = un / Je pose 1 et je retiens Dieu*. In Google English this means, *One + one = one / I put 1 and I hold back God*. *Two Heads* was first exhibited at The Meeting (NY) in 2018 and then at The Mishkin (NY) in 2019.

Then

The image in this painting was pulled from a book called *Impact- Photography for Advertising*, published by Eastman Kodak in 1973. The photograph was shot by Rudy Muller and comes from a chapter titled 'Portfolio—In the Studio'. The chapter's preface reads as follows: *Illustrations, to be commercially stimulating, do not necessarily have to deal with commercial subjects. Many of the photographs which follow were created as experiments or simply because the photographer wanted to make them. They serve as idea sources for the future.* *Then* was made in 2006. It shares the same dimensions as two other paintings in this exhibition and like them, the paint was applied with paint trim rollers and completed in one or two days. The word *THEN* was added after. It initially read as *HUMOUR THEN* but there was nothing funny about the image, then or now. And if the image wasn't funny, what was it? If it were Eastman Kodak's hope that Rudy Muller's photograph would be an idea source for the future, the future in 2006 was having trouble understanding it. Is the defenseless rose being cradled or is it in danger of being crushed by the strong hand of a man—or should it be read as the strong hand of a Black man? I wondered if Rudy Muller, or any commercial photographer for that matter, could ever stage an image without needing to make a point. And I wondered if an image could ever be read any other way. Could a painting? Could a painter? Could I? This is the first time *Then* has been exhibited.

Eyeballs/Eggs

This painting was completed in one day in 2006 but came after and overtop of a long struggle with a different painting. That struggle was with the painting's source material, which resists being painted to this day—especially in color. Found by searching the term "mort d'amour", the image is of a nude white woman in stilettoes, head tossed back, towering above a skeleton sitting cross-legged and prostrate below her with arms outstretched. The background is pure black, the skeleton is pure white, and the woman is flesh tone—which is to say that she is a combination of Naples Yellow, Titanium White, and Cadmium Red. The problem with this image has always been that as a painting, it could never become anything more than a copy of a photograph that could never have been real to begin with. Traces of trying to make it work, that time with a red and orange background, are still visible under the surface of *Eyeballs/Eggs*, glowing slightly across the top, giving the grey and white some body. *Eyeballs/Eggs* was shown for the first time at Svetlana (NY) in 2020. Its source material is a black and white advertisement from the early 1970s for Tofranil, an antidepressant made by a Swiss pharmaceutical company owned by my current landlord's family. I found the ad in an old copy of *Graphis* magazine from the mid-1970s. In the ad, the pitch to doctors for the drug is superimposed along the left side of one of the eggs. After the first line, *I wish I'd never been born*, it says:

The fragility of the ego,
when the mind
is in depression.

There are no safe retreats –
only the thin whimper
of withdrawal.

Consider Tofranil, along
with the total care you
give depressed patients.

It helps relieve symptoms
of depression. Especially
endogenous depression.

It may even help you
bring a depressive
out of her shell.

Humour Then

This image of a barstool, table, and ashtray backlit by a grid of yellow and red light was found on the Internet in 2005. Painted in 2006, it was the second attempt to make a pun with the 2005 painting, *Humour Now*. It too was made with a paint trim roller, including the blue lettering down the left side which was rolled on through a cardboard stencil. Until this year the only other person who had seen this painting was the photographer who documented it in my studio before it was taken off the stretcher, rolled up, and put in storage. Without an audience, *Humour Then* was humourless. What was the joke anyway? There's nothing all that funny about barstools, and most people didn't like puns anymore. By 2012, it still wasn't funny. That year I made a website. Using the digitized slide shot by the photographer in 2006, I cropped out the blue text in Photoshop and uploaded the painting to a section called *Humour Now*, hosted by the portfolio platform ArtPickle. The painting went back to being just an image of a barstool, table, and ashtray backlit by a grid of yellow and red light. Six years later I added a new section to my website called *Humour Then*, hosted by the portfolio and art commerce platform Artmajeur, and marked everything as 'SOLD'. Last night, wanting to know more about the origin of the barstool image for this written record, I did a Google Image search using the original file labelled "barstool.www.jpg". Google only found one match—the announcement for my exhibition, *Humour Then*.

Men & Memories

This painting was made in 2005 and removed from the stretcher around 2008. After being rolled up in storage for over a decade, it was re-stretched for this exhibition which is the first time it has been seen or shown. The lettering is made of oil paint applied through a low-tack adhesive mask cut from the font Arnold Boecklin. I chose Arnold Boecklin because it was close to an exact replication of the cover text for a publication found at Strand Books in the art section's dollar catalog bins. The catalogs were unsorted and filed with their spines to the left, so the only way to search them was one at a time. *Men & Memories* stood out because of its dimensions—it was taller and slimmer than most of the hundreds and thousands of others. Looking back, searching the bins was like being at an art fair featuring the entire history of the world's unsold artworks and forgotten artists—their collective output no longer worth the paper it was printed on. For that reason, it was better not to open the catalogs and just stay focused on the cover art. That was what I did. As a result, I had over time and until today convinced myself that *Men & Memories*, with its Art Nouveau script on a deep pink background, was a book of sheet music for a joyful song from the 1930s. As it turns out, *Men & Memories* is a 1972 exhibition catalog honoring the life and work of the English painter William Rothenstein. Marking the centennial of his birth, the title refers to his memoir, *Men and Memories: Recollections, 1872-1938*. A beloved figure in the art world of his day, Rothenstein lived from 1872 – 1945. He was renowned for the quality of his portraiture but equally for his generosity and the support he gave to other artists. *Men & Memories* recollects his love of craft and ornament, as well as his advocacy within the art academy for the deeply held conviction that only those who were experienced craftsmen were fit to teach others.

The Work

Painted in 2005, the image came from a 1979 psychology textbook called *Comprenda La Psicología: Una Perspectiva Personal* by Leonard Kristal. Found at Kafka's Books & Internet Café in Miami Beach around 2004, it was a rare gift as source material for painting. Full of generic, dramatic color illustrations with explanations and captions in Spanish, a language I can't read, it supplied the material for at least three other paintings. Its original title was *Ball and Chain* but I changed it to *The Work* in 2019 for an exhibition of the same name at The Mishkin (NY) in which labor was an important theme. But having never bothered to translate the image's caption from Spanish to English until now, it appears that neither of the titles I chose accurately reflect what the author was trying to illustrate. The caption reads: *En cuanto a la polémica sobre la primacia de la herencia o del ambiente (o del huevo y la gallina), las personas tienden a estar encadenadas a los prejuicios.* In Google English this means: *As for the controversy over the primacy of heredity or the environment (or the chicken and the egg), people tend to be chained to prejudice.* The image had nothing to do with labor. How did I miss the pictorial representation of one of the world's most overused clichés, chicken and egg? Either it was my own laziness of perception, or it was because nobody really knows which comes first—the image or the text.

Today

Today was painted over several months in the year 2000. The white background was layered on with a pallet knife to cover up and smooth over any marks left behind from scraping off an unfinished painting underneath. Without the texture the bristles of a brush would have left behind in the paint however, the top layer failed to adhere to the one below and over time they began to separate. *Today* was first exhibited in 2001 at Modern Culture at the Gershwin Hotel (NY) and then again in 2019 at The Mishkin (NY). During the intervening eighteen years, large cracks started to appear in its surface. By 2019, whole areas of the painting's top layer could be lifted off without much effort, taking with them the black enamel lettering traced on from a projection of intertitles from the 1925-26 silent film *Shagai, Soviet! (Forward, Soviet!)* by Dziga Vertov. This film is one of 330 included in the Essential Cinema Repertory collection at Anthology Film Archives in New York where I worked from 1999 to 2002 as the Print Traffic Coordinator & Head Theater Manager. One of my responsibilities was to hand out photocopies of the English language translations of subtitles and intertitles from the Essential Cinema's non-English language films. The Essential Cinema was assembled between 1970-75 by Anthology's Film Selection Committee, James Broughton, Ken Kelman, Peter Kubelka, Jonas Mekas, and P. Adams Sitney. The committee determined that for the sake of cinematic purity, the sanctity of the image, and to preserve the filmmaker's intention, prints in the collection should not be altered in any way, effectively barring subtitling. Hard copy translations were thus provided for those who could or wanted to follow along, reading line by line in darkness during the film projection. The Essential Cinema has been screening on rotation in alphabetical order for more than 45 years. Large areas of *Today* were removed and repainted in 2019 but cracking continues to appear on other areas of its surface.

Bikini Girls

Bikini Girls were made by applying daubs of color to one canvas and using the blank face of another to blend the paint, creating a second painting—a reflection. *Bikini Girls* are from a set of thirteen *Reflections* made between 2000 and 2001. Most were black and white portraits taken from a 1963 picture book called *Faces and Destinies* by French photographer Thérèse Le Prat. Her oversized photographs captured French theater actors in character during moments of hyper-expression. Prefaced by a long-form poem—similarly arch, self-serious and earnest—the book and the images themselves are extraordinarily beautiful. *Here are faces, masks of the soul, scrutinizing anxious or calm their destiny,* she wrote. As paintings in the year 2000 in New York however, they did little more than provide me with a way to visually consume the book's unironic beauty, but that was all. And then a full color catalog for Venus Swimwear arrived in the mail. I found the model and

the photography beautiful in a similar way so I decided to try and paint her. It worked. One pair of *Bikini Girls* was shown in a group exhibition at Modern Culture at the Gershwin Hotel (NY) in 2001 called *This is the Modern World*. All three *Bikini Girls* were exhibited in 2019 at The Mishkin (NY).

Three frames from Jeanne Dielman

Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles is the title of a 1975 narrative film by Chantal Akerman. Using extended real-time takes, the film documents three days in a woman's domestic and working life. Each day is bracketed by intertitles, as depicted in this painting made in 2020 as a facsimile of an earlier version, painted in 1998. The first *Jeanne Dielman* was shown at Artists Space (NY) in 1999 and then sold shortly thereafter. It was the first of two times an art collector has bought my work. I agreed to his terms, accepting as payment an equivalent sum of hotel credit redeemable on a hard to reach island in the Caribbean. I never made it there during the years that passed after the sale, but I never forgot about the deal and always wondered what happened to my painting. Then, in 2017 a request came from Artists Space to exhibit the work again. I found my copy of the faxed contract. It stated that the sale wouldn't be complete until all of the hotel credit was redeemed. I still owned the painting. The problem was, the collector had lost track of *Jeanne Dielman* in 2012 and no longer knew where she was.

A Feminist Issue Is

The text and title of this painting from 2005 are owed to *Spokeswoman* magazine, Volume 9, Number 12, published in June 1979. They were ripped from a column in the Health section titled *Nuclear Power: A Feminist Issue*. The painting's image was found in *Graphis* magazine in a 1972 spread featuring examples of a successful German advertising campaign by the fashion house C & A Brenninkmeyer. Originally printed as a full-page newspaper ad, the copy reads, *für heute 10 / uhr drucken wir beide daumen*. In Google English it says, *for today 10 o'clock we print both thumbs*. The two thumbs looked like they were detonating a bomb, but beyond that, the connection between image and language in this painting was connected to an internal struggle to reconcile two very different preoccupations I had at that time, Martin Kippenberger and social movements. On *Spokeswoman's* cover was a portrait of chimney sweep Shannon Hall. The caption of a second image of Hall on the inside cover, posing next to a chimney and holding a cleaning brush, read: *Cover: Shannon Hall, one of the few female chimney sweeps in the country, runs her non-traditional, woman-owned business from headquarters in Nottingham, NH, where she is active in the Chimney Sweep Guild*. Hall's image later became a painting called *The First Female Chimney Sweep*. *Spokeswoman* was a journal based in Washington, DC that covered topics relating to the welfare of women. Now defunct, it only exists as the *Spokeswoman Magazine Printed Materials Collection* at the Smithsonian Institution. Measuring just 2 cubic feet, or 4 boxes, the collection does not include any *Spokeswoman* magazines. Instead, it is made up of materials collected by the magazine during the period it was active. It serves "as a window into the world of feminists and women's rights activists from 1972 to 1980 and the topics discussed encompass the most important legislation and issues of the time period." *A Feminist Issue Is* was shown for the first time at The Mishkin in 2019.

(b)light, derived from a painting by Michael Patterson

(b)light, derived from a painting by Michael Patterson was made in late 2019 after a three-year hiatus from painting. After so much time away, the only way to start was simply with an image I wanted to work from. The source material is the 6/14 cover of a magazine called *Chronogram, Arts. Culture. Spirit*. When I made this painting, I wasn't aware that *Chronogram Media* was headquartered in Kingston, NY and serves as a regional thought-leader. I didn't know that *Chronogram publishes content viewed by over 2.5 million readers throughout the Hudson Valley, Berkshires, and the tri-state area*, or that it brings ideas to life through

intelligent storytelling. All I saw when looking at this image was extraordinary cover art illustration that had deep depth of field and ravishing color. As the first painting I was to make in years and for no particular reason, I thought that was all I needed to know. And then, just as it was nearing completion after weeks of daily painting and repainting, an invitation came from Pujan Karambeigi to contribute something to a group exhibition. For that, I felt responsible to learn where the source material was from so I searched “Chronogram magazine 6/14”. And there it was. *Chronogram’s* cover art was no illustration—it was a painting by an artist. And not only was it a painting, it was just one section of a much larger painting, which was just one in a series of many other paintings of young women strolling in dappled light in public parks by the artist Michael Patterson. *(b)light* was shown at Kai Mitsumiya (NY) in 2019 and Svetlana (NY) in 2020.

Lise Soskolne