

UNIT 17

Tristan Unrau

False Idols

23 April - 30 May 2021

Unit 17 (Vancouver)

Whatever You Want: Tristan Unrau

For such a fun, sensual show, Tristan Unrau has chosen a number of somber starting points. Titled *False Idols*, Unrau's exhibition, consisting of nine new paintings and a variety of sculpture (including 7 small scale bronzes) riffs off of both the Old Testament and the first episode of Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Dekalog* (1988) as cultural works that examine both the limits and possibilities held by painting and image making at large. *False Idols* gestures towards the second of the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God in Deuteronomy 4:16:

"Beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven."

Upon reflection of the show, I repeatedly found myself laughing out loud when mulling over this quote. I would point out that the imagery used by Unrau in *False Idols* is anything but sanctimonious: bronze cats with meticulously modeled anuses posing upon plinths and a painting of a sweeper based on a critically-panned CoBra show. To employ this imagery within the context of the Old Testament, the decidedly darker testament of the Bible, is hilarious. But it works! There's a sense of humor in Tristan's work, and it repeatedly rears its head throughout his practice. In Unrau's MA thesis paper at UCLA, he references TJ Clark's *Image of the People*, noting that painting is no longer a part of the historical process, but a representative of art in general. That is not to say painting can no longer shift politics. The controversy surrounding the postpostment of Philip Guston's travelling monograph is an example of this, an artist in fact referenced by Unrau in his *Armada* painting - but it is now more open to a plurality of possibilities, rather than being hemmed in as a hallowed medium which operates either within the arena of the historical or religious.

In a conversation with Unrau, he noted that he prefers that a painting's meaning isn't overly communicated by the artist, laid bare for all to see. *Dekalog*'s appearance in the exhibition takes the form of a large oil portrait of Pawel, the story's young protagonist, who goes through an existential crisis propelled by seeing the corpse of a dog. However, a neatly wrapped little allegory for meaning making can be found in the story's computer. Pawel's father, a computer scientist named Krzysztof, instills in his young son a reverence for rationality and science, a trait reflected in his faith in computers. Krzysztof and his son, Pawel, place a lot of faith in the computer as an object or technology, despite the fact that the computer often fails to reveal the truth, including the ability to know what a human user dreams of, or even its own desires. The gravity the duo place upon this object as a prophet or as an engine for human development eventually ends with serious consequences. The computer, at the end, is a non-sentient object,

fundamentally limited in ways, but wide open in others. Its potentiality lies in our ability to understand its limitations and to run with them.

The computer in Dekalog finds its analog in the same way Unrau approaches image making. The allegory becomes especially pronounced in the way the Dekalog's computer fundamentally lacks self awareness. It cannot think for itself beyond what the programmer instills within it, and even then these traces of human intent can be read and mobilized in a myriad of ways. We can only instill so much trust in the painting as an object, but it's within the process of reading images that painting can truly open up. The artist (or engineer) labours, obsesses even, over their gesture, their forming of material and its up to the rest of us, to read it. False Idols celebrates this way of approaching art objects, in which open-endedness is celebrated and subjective interpretation is grounded at the fore. References to Biblical motifs are present here but in abstracted forms, several degrees of separation away from direct Bible verses. We can see them in Unrau's Penrose Prayer, a psychedelic work inspired by the non repeating, infinite tiling system discovered by Roger Penrose, but also inspired by Mennonite tiling, an invocation of the divine both in the reference to Mennonite communities as well as in the way in which mathematical infinity has figured itself into several theological doctrines.

SuperGiant is a sort of portrait of solar activity, representing some of the universe's largest solar objects with the aesthetic vibrancy and psychedelic tones of an acid trip. Terrestrial nature also appears in smaller paintings, acting as a tie in between several of the thematics on exhibit. Astonishing Journey, a cropped section of a Frederic Edwin Church painting, which depicts an iceberg and either sunrise or sunset, hints back back at the earlier themes of divinity while giving a small nod to a larger historical art engagement, the iceberg being an iconic image employed by the Group of Seven.

Fear, Uncertainty, Doubt and Thank You David Park employ a faux naive style of figuration, paying homage to the CoBra art movement in the first title, and Bay Area figuration in the second, two movements from the mid 20th century that formed a counter current to the abstraction that has dominated modern art. The spectre of Dekalog haunts the room with Pawel, a large-scale portrait of the namesake protagonist, contemplating the inevitability of death and an existential crisis that still finds meaning in a life bound to end. Scripture, art history, nature, and the cosmos all ebb and flow into each other and draw tangents and gestures towards other images and discussions not directly present in the room. However, this is my own reading, and arguably, Unrau would implore any viewer to come up with their own.

As a counter balance to the paintings, the room is populated by sculptural works, almost human scale plinths made of cardboard which can subsume each other like nesting dolls, adorned with bronze cats undergoing various degrees of oxidation. The ability to read these sculptures as an abstracted altar or homage to divine worship is troubled by the cats' anatomically correct anuses, laid bare for all. These works bring us back to Deuteronomy 4:16 which warns that the threat of figurative art is that we may in fact come to worship the art rather than the creator.

This is what the Old Testament warns but if I want to worship a cat's asshole, so what? The medium doesn't know what it is, it isn't self aware, and it has no idea what it ought to say, it simply exists. The medium, and even the artist's gesture, can only communicate so much. The fun (and the sin) lies in how we read it, in that eternal game of association.

- Leo Cocar

Unrau (b. 1989) lives and works in Los Angeles. He holds an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and a BFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Unrau was a 2013 resident at the Banff Centre, and in 2015 & 2017 was a finalist for the Royal Bank of Canada Painting Competition. He has held recent solo shows at Phil Gallery in Los Angeles and Towards in Toronto. In 2016 Unrau participated in the survey group exhibition Vancouver Special: Ambivalent Pleasures at the Vancouver Art Gallery. A forthcoming two person exhibition with Willie Read opens at Stanley's (LA) in June 2021.

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List of works:



Wave Form, 2021, oil on oil paper, 40.6 x 30.4cm



Pawel, 2021, oil on canvas, 139.7 x 109.2cm



SuperGiant, 2021, oil on oil paper, 40.6 x 30.4cm



Penrose Prayer, 2021, oil on canvas, 139.7 x 109.2cm



Fear, Uncertainty, Doubt, 2020, oil on oil paper, 40.6 x 30.4cm



Astonishing Journey, 2021, oil on linen, 50.8 x 40.6cm



Armada, 2021, oil on oil paper, 50.8 x 40.6cm



Thank you David Park, 2021, oil on oil paper, 40.6 x 30.4cm



Near the Cabin at Kingfisher farm, 2021, oil on oil paper, 40.6 x 30.4cm



Idol 1, 2021, bronze, 4.4 x 12.7 x 7.6cm, edition of 3



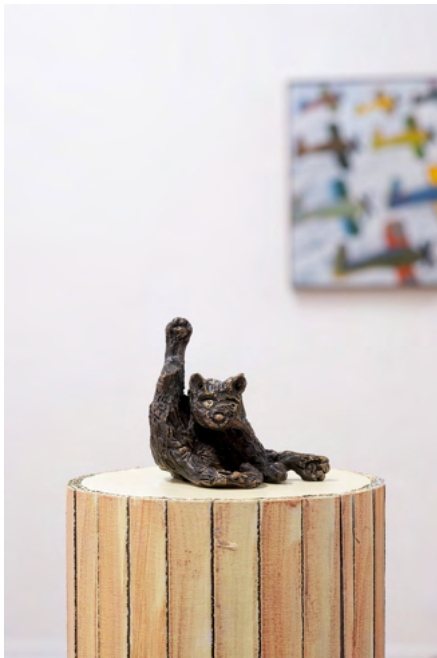
Idol 2, 2021, bronze, 9 x 5 x 9cm, edition of 3



Idol 3, 2021, bronze, 9 x 7 x 4cm, edition of 3



Idol 4, 2021, bronze, 8.5 x 11 x 6cm, edition of 3



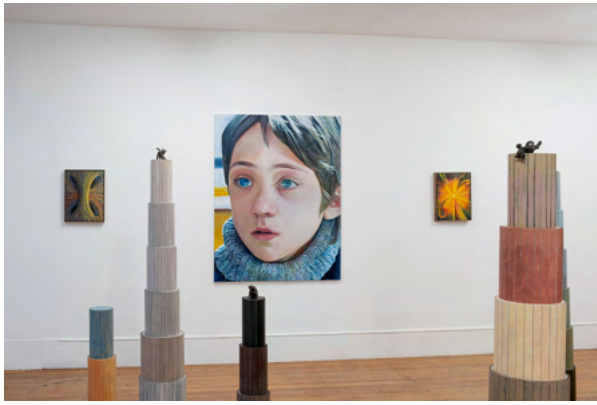
Idol 5, 2021, bronze, 8 x 8 x 8cm, edition of 3



Idol 6, 2021, bronze, 7 x 5 x 7cm, edition of 3



Idol 7, 2021, bronze, 8.75 x 8 x 4cm, edition of 3



False Idols installation view



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All images courtesy of the artist and Unit 17 (Vancouver)