

JACK RYAN,
Spectator

THE MEETING

SEPT 16 – OCT 28, 2023

BANALITIES

Banalities are not meant as a narrowing of intention. The contrary. Banalities connect the author with the world around him. They connect the extreme and the whimsical with the common life, with America, with the decade, with the type. They serve, in a sense, as a form of history. – *Elizabeth Hardwick, “A Sense of the Present”*

What to do with the recent paintings of Jack Ryan, which at first appear to signal an emptying out of content, a contrarian return to the sort of “retinal art” famously negated by Duchamp, whose passage from painting to the readymade in the early twentieth century has rested at the foundation of art-historical discourse since at least the mid- 1960s? An obtuse question, and, perhaps, an unfair one. In these new works, Ryan has taken up a form of Pointillism, perhaps the most optically oriented school of all the “-isms,” not as a form of historical pastiche, but rather as a means to reimagine the minor, anonymous things with which he has consistently concerned himself, the byproducts of personal memory-formation. The desk chair, the architectural fragment, and the residential street are both the subjects of Ryan’s paintings and the sort of generative banalities that connect the artist to the world. And it is through a complex procedure of mediation, borrowed from historical modes of representation, that Ryan reveals such banalities’ inextricable relationship to the present.

THE RESIDUAL SUNDAY

Describing perhaps the most canonical work completed in the Pointillist style, Georges Seurat’s *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, 1884, Ernst Bloch, in a brief section of *The Principle of Hope* entitled “Painters of the Residual Sunday,” refers to the painting as a “single mosaic of boredom, a masterful rendering of the disappointed longing and the incongruities of a *dolce far niente*.” Setting itself apart from the pastoral genre, *La Grand Jatte* stages a critique of bourgeois society by retaining consciousness of the external, workaday world, of “an absolute non-Sunday.”

The art historian Linda Nochlin, in the essay “Seurat’s *La Grande Jatte*: An Anti-Utopian Allegory,” argued that such readings of Seurat’s masterpiece stem from its atomized pictorial structure, with its associations not only referring to then-contemporary scientific advances, but also to the mass production of commodities, as well as the mass dissemination of images through the press. “Of all the post-Impressionists,” she wrote, “[Seurat] is the only one to inscribe the modern condition itself—with its alienation, anomie, the experience of living in the society of the spectacle, of making a living in a market economy in which exchange value took the place of use value and mass production that of artisanal production—in the very fabric and structure of a picture.” For Ryan, these visual codes are transmuted into the barely perceptible objects of routine, of commute, and the canvas becomes the apparatus through which both the landscape and idle distraction are put back to work. There is embedded within this framework a light joke about the artist today: in the move from nineteenth century Paris to present-day Brooklyn, the picturesque river Seine is exchanged for the Gowanus, and the artist, faced with other forms of employment, converts the leisure time of Sunday into work time, too.

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THE MECHANICAL EYE

If the defining gesture of nineteenth-century Impressionism was indeed to exhibit the preliminary sketch as finished work, and the post Impressionists often rejected spontaneity while retaining the Impressionists' outward emphasis on the picture's construction, it is likewise in the translation from sketch to drawing to painting that Ryan locates the "incisive distancing" Nochlin identifies in Seurat. In this case, the artist's preliminary sketch, the digital image produced by the phone-camera, is always already a technically-generated mosaic, as evinced by the works themselves. The idiosyncratic perspectives of Ryan's paintings replicate not the vision of the human eye, but rather that of the camera. And yet, it is this mechanical origin that Ryan then paradoxically disassembles through his repetitive, labor-intensive application of oil point to canvas, producing a form of social realism that confesses its own limitations. Memory distorts even the most banal mental image and renders it associative – fragments of other images creep into view, and suddenly the stairway banister of the childhood home sits alongside the house's exterior. Moments of more expressive brushwork, Tuymans-esque daubs of blue-grey, along with the fragmentary nature of the compositions, populated by spectral figures and other afterimages, all converge to undermine the anti-expressive qualities of the method itself.

SPECTATORS

The tennis match and the sailboat race are but two Sunday activities that require a spectator to complete their meaning. Our eyes dart back and forth, or slowly follow the course of action, but our bodies remain still, and somehow in this act of passive observation we provide the game's participants with the impetus to keep performing. Can a painting ever be "spectated" in this way? Viewed, observed, contemplated, considered – these are the sort of mental activities usually done to the canvas by the subject standing before it. To spectate would seem to imply the viewer's involvement in an unfolding narrative, a form of action conspicuously absent from Ryan's paintings, particularly. But then, it seems as though the question is misplaced. In Seurat's canvasses, not only *La Grande Jatte*, but also other works, including *Le Cahut*, 1890, and *The Circus*, 1891, events – the sailboat race, the cabaret, the circus – are peopled by the audience, transforming them into images of spectatorship, of others' viewing. Seurat's perspective remains detached, extrinsic, while Ryan's, tethered to the mechanical eye of the camera, does not. It is, in fact, through this shift in perspective that Ryan recasts the artist himself as the passive observer of the scene, and through his mediation, turns us into one as well. The spectator, both internal and external, completes the work.

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Jack Ryan (b. 1990). Lives in Brooklyn, New York. Education: BFA, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island (2014). Solo Exhibitions: Baader-Meinhof, Omaha, Nebraska (2022), Baader-Meinhof, Omaha, Nebraska (2021). Group Exhibitions: Baader-Meinhof, Omaha, Nebraska (2023), Baitball, Polignano a Mare, Italy (2022), Fall River MoCa, Fall River, Massachusetts (2021).