

Kévin Blinderman

The ravishment of modern figuration

17.02 - 10.03/2024

We find ourselves in an elegant show of three small, let's call them bijoux, paintings by modern masters: Bonnard, Brauner and Manet. That the show is elegant is demonstrated not only by the provenance of the painters, but the narrowness of the selection. Despite their diverse styles – more evidence of the refined eye of the collector – they have been gathered on a single, classical theme: the kiss. But this is a gay kiss, or at least a kiss between men. That Manet should make a work that is homosexual, rather than just homosocial, is surprising, but then again, this surprise is itself a mark of quality, the *épater les bourgeois* or old-fashioned shock of the new that viewers expect and seek, like the four 'deconstructive' stitches on the back of a Margiela shirt. In fact, the pictures have been generated by AI according to instructions given by artist Kevin Blinderman and then painted to order. Whether that makes him an artist or collector isn't clear, and confusions of identity are key to understanding here (if understanding rather than aesthetic appreciation is desirable). Either way, he has excellent taste.

Preciosity is a recurring theme in Blinderman's work. From his research on gay nightlife dandy Jacques de Bascher to his club-culture installations, his exhibitions have examined the spaces and codified styles which shape gay subjectivity. Other works have treated identity as a kind of found object, as when he told his biography through that of the founder of modern gay identity Magnus Hirschfeld. The idea that something as personal as one's identity or tastes could be contrived is at the heart of preciosity – *les Précieuses* were not born, not every aristocrat could become one, but rather fashioned by adopting unnatural poses. Through strategies of appropriation or stylization, Blinderman appears to be pursuing a gay self-portraiture which maintains a distance from any coherent subject behind the representation – after all the title of one of the artist's club nights was the anti-identitarian 'Queer Is Not A Label'. His queering and appropriation of the modern masters might be understood as another operation in this distanced self-portraiture of Blinderman as modern gay French artist.

But there is another dimension here, that of ravishment. To ravish means not only to be enraptured by passion, but to be taken by force. Perhaps Blinderman is exercising revenge on a canon of modern painters who with their endless female nudes clung to a normative heterosexuality even modern man was

being remade. Through the act of imitating their distinctive styles, but turned towards an image of sentimentality between men, he may be insisting on the latent link between the modern artist's aestheticism, sensitivity or stylishness and the effeminacy of preciosity. Early 20th century American art critic Thomas Craven made this relationship explicit, complaining of French modern painters as 'supercilious voluptuaries' and 'androgynists'. Others such as queer theorist Alan Sinfield, have noted that the morbid preoccupation of modernists with beauty in decline, sensuality and immorality, put them on the side of perverse, unproductive sexuality. There is more than a hint of sickness in the pallid skin on show in *Bisou Caramel* (VI, 2024). Blinderman might be taking the side of the female nude in kidnapping Bonnard, Brauner and Manet, in order to, undermine their virility.

If this comes close to imputing a modern homosexuality backwards, an essentialising move, then attention should be paid to Blinderman's strategies of appropriation. Appropriation, a cognate of ravishment or taking, is associated with a queer undermining of subjectivity. Homosexuals have long been referred to as inauthentic, unnatural – the 'clone' was the name of a gay subculture – given the status of inferior imitations of real men and women. Blinderman's computer generated images are consciously unnatural copies, all misshapen limbs and distorted backgrounds. Queer thinkers took up the charge of imitation to argue that the copy undermines the status of the original. For Judith Butler it is only through the invention of homosexuality as secondary, that heterosexuality makes its claim to be the primary or true. The copy confers upon the original its status as original. But this does not simply invert the gay straight relationship, making homosexuality the authentic way of being, since it is only as an inauthentic repetition that queerness can be said to invent the original. This move is temporal and ontological: the copy which comes second usurps what comes before, much as a piece of appropriation art troubles us with the possibility it might pass for the real thing. That the very image of same sex desire is that of the copy – one sex doubled, the same again – is visible in the repetition of figures in Blinderman's pictures, differentiated only by their seemingly parodic imitation of gender roles: the clothed figure has a moustache or top hat, the nude sits on his lap, submissive. The artist's linking of the homosexualised copy to that of appropriation art, might be said to insist on a queerness that loses rather than recovers any subjectivity from the past.

And this loss of self takes us back to the romantic meaning of ravishment, for example, as in the novel *Le ravisement de Lol V. Stein* (1964) by Marguerite Duras. In this book Lol appears to lose herself into a repetition compulsion after the discovery of her lover's betrayal, an act she only dimly remembers. The story is told by her new lover, Jacques, the one who replaces the abandoner, taking on his role, and who feels compelled to repeat her story. To represent

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appears to be to repeat, but at a distance from the event. Trauma, love and representation are each linked by Duras, to the attempt to recover an earlier feeling, but each reiteration produces a loss or failure of restitution. Loving Lol and retelling her story, Jacques is at risk of losing his own identity into hers, just as Lol lost part of herself through the traumatic memory of her lost love. Ravishment might be the risk of the disintegration of the self through the incorporation of another, to be taken by one's lover, or to integrate the other by a repetition and reassertion of the self. Blinderman's pictures, in which couples mirror one another but also merge, bodies melting together through the act of kissing and imperfect mechanical repetition, might simply be images of love.

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Kevin Blinderman (b. 1994) lives and works between Paris and Berlin. He recently exhibited at Sultana (Paris), Haus N. (Athens), Basel Social Club with Conditions (Basel), KW Institute (Berlin), Confort Moderne (Poitiers), Berghain with the Boros Collection (Berlin), and Bern Kunsthalle. Concluding 2023 with a residency at Synagogue de Delme in duo with Flora Citroën, they will start a new residency in Prague with the French Institute and CEAAC in April 2024.

1 Kévin Blinderman
Bisou caramel (IV), 2024
Oil on Linen
40 x 31 cm

2 Kévin Blinderman
Bisou caramel (V), 2024
Oil on Linen
30 x 22 cm

3 Kévin Blinderman
Bisou caramel (VI), 2024
Oil on Linen
50 x 41 cm

