

“Of all the contradictions that define modern life none seems more persistent than the growing sense that everything is getting worse at the same time that our technological and material conditions are getting better. After all, the more we submit to innovation the harder it becomes to determine whether or not technology is in fact cheapening the very things it was designed to improve. This is seen most clearly in our relationship to the photographic image, which becomes less culturally meaningful the easier it becomes to produce. Nowadays you have to wonder: Is there anything more worthless than an anonymous photo? Of course, photography is just a means of recording the past, so when you question the worth of a photographic image you are in fact questioning the value of the past itself. In that sense, the feeling of cheapness that seems to pervade contemporary society can be understood as a reflection of our inability to take anything but the present seriously. Innovation has become such a driving force that change has become an end in itself. In fact, the forces of change have developed such a will of their own that we have become nostalgic for Progress.”

(Devin Leonardi)

It is this hopeful sense of weighing the once positive and liberating, almost innocent notion of progress against the more contemporary force of change that is at the heart of Devin Leonardi's new paintings.

The motifs he targets and the atmosphere he captures in his intimate, intense versions of the American epic, go back to a time before the ‘modernisms’ of the 20th century that are referred to so casually by many of today's young artists. In an effort to reveal the persistence of the “modern” as a nascent force within American history Leonardi's work looks back to terrains of the nineteenth century Americana, to landscape painting, to pictorial narratives of the conquest of the West with its collaterals, victims and of course its repressed memory. But unlike his past work, in which Leonardi gave a lot of attention to the political details and accuracies of the sites he was painting as a kind of historical conservation, he now enters a new realm, a new dimension of painting. Anonymous Western tropes are set next to the appearance of the Nude in Leonardi's work: the strangely timid and rudimentary presence of the Nude verges away from the other motifs and in the process eliminating subject matter.

Again these intimately formatted Nudes are based on photographs taken in the late-eighteen eighties by the circle of American painter Thomas Eakins.

“I'm always amazed at how easily Eakins legacy is ignored by the contemporary art-world, especially when you consider his importance as a link between the traditions of European

Academicism and the early roots of American Modernism. Put simply, Eakins lost his job as the head of America's leading art academy because he and his students were taking photos of one another in the nude. This act of photographing was, at the time, genuinely outrageous, particularly when it came to his female students. This little bit of history is, in my opinion, the key to understanding the degree to which modernity arose consciously only to end up as a kind of reflexive posture.

With these pieces I worked to illuminate the nascent roots of modernism, which appear to lie just beneath the surface of the original photograph. After the civil war, Americans became obsessed with the idea that the country had lost its early republican innocence, and as a result the whole concept of "childhood" became a conscious one. This also had to do with the fact that the "constant change" of industrialism made youth and innocence seem fleeting and therefore desirable. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, also budding youth and nascent adulthood became objects of fascination; think Huckleberry Finn, Alice in Wonderland or, more specifically, the photographs taken by Eakins' students."

(Devin Leonardi)

In order to better understand a kind of American historical identity Leonardi has moved from New York City to Montana and in a effort to revive the genre of history painting he has shifted from the use of watercolor to oil. Essentially, Leonardi has now condensed his narratives in more minimal, allegorical and non-site tableaux. People in these paintings become mere shadows and the light seems to come from an artificial source connecting the "sentimental panorama" with the unforgiving modern reality of the photographic. More than ever before, the photographic image itself has a ghost-like presence in these paintings. They are elegiac and mournful, even morbid, surprising yet familiar, intimacy works against modern freshness. Despite the disparity of subject matter they deliver some elemental feeling.

Leonardi's paintings are from now on allegories for the complicated relationship between photography and painting itself: they elaborate with subtle atmospheric force, - they are almost entirely light and atmosphere -, on the wound inflicted on painting by the raise of photography in France in the 1850s, which marked for all times the end of painting. And although painting since explored all sorts of new possibility of modernist legitimation, it – so reflected by Leonardi – never resolved itself and became burdened with guilt. Modernity in painting, so the artist, is a display of trauma induced by photography. The culminating exposure of which found a stage in Abstract Expressionism in its cultural schizophrenia and epileptic fits of existentialism.

The peculiar traditionalism and classicism of painting carries constantly its own contradiction: painting needs tradition and history. Leonardi seeks a way of becoming more comfortable and conscious with the history of painting, accommodating the nervousness of depicting sentimental images of Americana for example, - instead of using history against itself as sheer “shock value” and pastiche (as done in many painterly approaches since the 1980s). It is a search for a completely new way conditioned by a high degree of cautiousness, negation and negotiation, and then a new attempt again. The artist sometimes approaches a painting motif several times all over again, until this fine balance of a new kind of history painting is achieved and settled for in the artists mind and conviction.

Next to the new series of paintings in “Sentimental Panorama” Devin Leonardi for the first time shows a group of political cartoons, which present a whole other side of his interest and skills. While the artist’s painting processes are very time-invested and ultra cautious, the work on the cartoon ink-drawings are a far more immediate outlet for Leonardi’s contemporary sensibility to American politics. Inspired by the New Zealand cartoonist Sir David Alexander Cecil Low, Devin Leonardi drew a group of caricatures when the economic downturn began in 2008. We see sharply humorous sketches such as “As the Bountiful Waters Recede a Few Old Wrecks Come Into View”, “Lehman Brothers” and “Bail Out” of genuine artistic freedom. Their style and genre status constantly shifts between the urgency of the political subject matter and a more general artistic vision of the draughtsman connecting this group to his painterly oeuvre.

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