

SECOND THOUGHTS OF MIND

What do you see when you walk around with a flashlight in the Folies Bergere, because there's nothing else to do – fore- ver? Caught in the Folies Bergere, the title of Birgit Megerle's most recent series of paintings, casts a more emphatically tinged light on the scenarios that produce and are generated by her paintings. I now see all the paintings that come after, and perhaps some that come before, as bracketed by – or inhabiting – the labyrinthine psychological space marked out by this trenchant title. Caught, but not trapped (even if the English caught has something of the trapped in its German equivalent *gefangen*), by some type of magnetism, fascination, or relapse. If you follow all of its vectors and reflections, push bottles aside, try to work out the trap doors of the composition, reconsider and update its detailed make-up. Manet's painting has become a territory, spilling out of its frame and always present, its repercussions like muddy footprints all around. Caught: marooned, stranded, isolated, cycling around within, or gravitationally kept in orbit.

A wish for drama and flair hovers in the air around Megerle's self-assured subjects, often painted after photo- sessions with friends or acquaintances, improvised around props and garments readily at hand (in the spirit of Celine and Julie teetering on Venus in Furs). Megerle imbues her subjects with a kind of ambiguity and presence of ideal po- tential reminiscent of Romaine Brooks, making the familiar person strange again. Painting them into an alternate zone in which their hidden, or invisible features, tendencies, and subtleties, are heightened. But the artist has always included herself as an actor and a producer among her paintings, creating a theater of reversible relationships that also tempts the viewer to join the company of a more ideal, perverse situation.

In Megerle's reappraisal of Manet's bar, the painting is severed into still-lives and portraits. As if to study, or bet- ter understand them, she subjects these components to various substitutions and updates, elaborating the glassware on the bar to include cocktails and tropical fruit that bring to mind commercial photography of the 70s, or the steel dance floor and mirrored vitrines framing dusty magnums and feathery kitsch in the now-closed West Berlin nightclub Big Eden. The bar maid herself is painted again and again, now in color, now in grisaille, now as a friend, now as a stranger, the look on her face flickers from glazed, to tired, to robotic, to slightly impatient, as if to say: "How can I serve you?", or

"Next!", or "What do you want?" She appears again, with no resemblance to her origins, as a life-sized grisaille painted cut-out of a woman in a floor-length Yves Saint Laurent dress inspired by Matisse, emblazoned with the life-size silhou- ette of a nude woman arching her back, her long "blond" hair swept amazingly to one side. She is both a sentinel and a party guest, a model and a

blockade. Somehow she knows she is a painting. To be caught is also ertappt, erwischt, as in: to be found out, to be caught red-handed, taken by surprise, seized, arrested, detained. Not to mention, to be caught in a web of intrigue, a web of lies.

"Sometimes I think painting is like a jail, like the jail of your own personality," Amelie von Wulffen wrote in a recent e-mail. Though the dream-logic of her earlier works persists in her newer and often incongruous cycles – un-moored image – collisions and – echoes interact by floating in proximity and sometimes touching or overlapping

– the former profusion of visionary and ecstatic incidents is pulled down by the physical traces of doubt, combat, and accident that mark the surfaces of these paintings. The recurrent invocation of Goya – in re-iterations of his famous self-portrait, and in allusions to his Capriccios in the borderline cartoon drawings of fruits and vegetables in familial or social scenarios – casts a mordant pall over the rather loose and scattershot compositions of fragments of historical paintings resting momentarily over fields of gesture-painting that bounce back between the inventions of the amateur and the aspirations of the avant-garde.

18th-century lemons float next to a wood-cut-like rendition of a quizzical Van Gogh (is it him?) over a knifed-in shoreline supporting two sober chateaux and their dithering reflections in the water merge choppily with the spackled light-blue ground, an effect of camouflage. A shifting of terms. Is this painting a trans-historical casino slot-machine?

A parade of re-figured self-portraits by other painters, including Hans von Marees, Gustave Caillebotte, and Lovis Corinth, adds up to a hectically shifting männergalerie, in the artists' words, though the treatment of these painters as effigies mingling with fruit and wild animals, faces found in abstract spills, and the trompe l'oeil insects of the vanitas tradition crawling like brooches also evoke the clamor of a menagerie. What exactly von Wulffen finds, or doesn't find, in the act of confronting by re-visiting and re-iterating these particular portraits divaricates and zig-zags from painting to painting. I can only guess that these painters have haunted her for different reasons at different times, and that this play of identification with their portraits as shards, brought close, and held at a distance, measures the flicker of self-disidentification. In one particularly violent painting, Caillebotte, Corinth, and Goya all overlap to form an abysmal emblem of hollow-eyed severed heads, their empty eyes all following different sight-lines. A painting heaped with semblances of dead things, like those abject Palissy plates arrayed to excess with snakes and all manner of seafood. El-sewhere, on a field of thick ice-cream-colored swipes over a sky-blue ground, two fuzzy-edged vignettes begin to merge: a post-war picture containing two other thoughts about painting. A

portmanteau picture.

Social interactions can be as bizarrely coded and irrational as the designs on a silk scarf. "What did she say?"

"Nooo, she DIDN'T,"

the women in Ella Kruglyanskaya's paintings seem to think, re-enacting these moments of climax on a loop. Initially, the whimsical bitchiness and vintage graphic bounce are assumed to deliver a full punch-line. In many paintings, two fashion-plates tug, press, squeeze to bursting, shimmy, wriggle, squiggle, and stretch up to and including the limits of the frame. Often they struggle over, or shield themselves with secondary representations of themselves: a drawing of a face, a woman's face printed on a newspaper, or on the clothes she wears. The painting itself can migrate into another painting: echo-chambers of tensions and misunderstanding, like the generative and distorting effects of gossip. Men appear as shadows, as cartoonish attributes (moustaches) entering or leaving the frame, or as invasive, hilariously mons- trous presences grimacing on bathing suits. In these paintings, everything is potentially a mask, or the doubled mask of Janus. The painted "events" show subjects in repose verging on boredom, or in the confusing heat of the moment itself, described in a dizzying ricochet of gazes and double-takes. "What just happened?" "Someone invaded my painting."

Recent invocations of feminism in service to the art world revolve around questionable, closed concepts like "community" or an even more spurious gender essentialism, but Kruglyanskaya's paintings are among the only contem- porary works I know that describe the unspoken antagonisms among women that regulate through social violence. A consistent, dyadic inner tension makes the most of the face-off between two characters, though it is often unclear if the two women are not split versions of the same self in conflict or collusion. Through beads of sweat, stretched mini-skirts, scribbled patterning and traces of exuberant vandalism, Ella's subject emerges, the insouciant muse as part-time self- portrait. The more I look at them I begin to see a kinship – in their bravado, and in their ambivalent spirit – with Louise Fishman's Angry Paintings [c. 1973], blinking in my mind like neon signs:

ANGRY HARMONY

ANGRY

BIANCA

BIANCA

Raking through influences, re-shuffling the deck. Revision as invention, to suit one's own needs. In Fashion Drawing in Vogue, William Packer writes,

"But influences must also be assimilated, perhaps deflected, to serve practical ends, as they become absorbed into the common stock of visual devices. Like water coming through the roof, they may reveal themselves with a certain obvious directness, but they are quite as likely to follow a more devious path, turning up who knows when, or where, or having picked up what along the way."

Of the many threads in this exhibition, perhaps a central technique is the motif of multiple embeddings, which operates like a reverse-zoom and a -pan – paintings inside paintings. The interlocking, floating, layering, or in-laying of images within one another to render the picture plane ambivalent is perhaps most evident in the japonisme of Nadira Husain's paintings, which is, of course, also a self-reflexive Orientalism, Nabis-like, patchwork-like, and dazzling. Patterns exceed their limits and combine with others to produce filter-like expanses on and through which scenarios are viewed. Husain brandishes the non-verbal, non-referential power of transmission of ornamental languages, a shuttling inheritance of culturally polyphonic images and image-texts which can contain, obscure, and fuse with new meaning.

This revised Grammar of Ornament re-aligns and overloads distinct patterns with invented or purposely derivative decorations and optical triggers to create a visual field where figure and ground open and close as in a pop-up book. As I look at them and think them "through" Birgit, Amelie, and Ella, I remember the dual experience of watching Pasolini's Arabian Nights in the Museum of Modern Art's basement cinema, and then coming up to see works by Duncan Grant, Sonia Delaunay, Sophie Taueber Arp, Marsden Hartley, and Suzanne Duchamp all in the same space – derailed inventions. Shot in Yemen, Persia, Nepal, Ethiopia, and India, Pasolini's filmic adaptation of stories compiled and transformed over centuries is structured around tales within tales, or dreams within dreams, and even now, so soon after seeing it, the recollection really does crumble apart like sugar. There are moments in the film where you forget which dream level you are in, distracted by slapstick, or captivated by the tenderness and hilarity of sex, and it loops around, and then suddenly you come up again and reconnect - the way you catch yourself when trying to understand or replicate the repeats in an all-over pattern.

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