

Aistė Stancikaitė: *Crossings*

GNYP

OPENING: OCTOBER 25, 2024, 5-8 PM

EXHIBITION: OCTOBER 25 - NOVEMBER 23, 2024

There is a multi-dimensionality to the luminous drawings and canvases in Aistė Stancikaitė's latest solo exhibition 'Crossings'. The works feature androgynous and anonymous beings, gloved hands, mouths and tongues, intricate fabric folds, floating and layered on backlit picture planes. Uncanny and erotic, the artist's sheen imagery brings an eerie sensuality to the fore. A passage in Paul B. Preciado's book 'An Apartment on Uranus' (2019) inspired the exhibition's title. Preciado's Foucauldian-inspired queer theory uses poetic cadence to communicate across a quasi-metaphysical divide. He asks: 'Can the jaguar or the cyborg lend us their voices? To speak is to invent the language of the crossing, to project one's voice into an interstellar expedition: to translate our difference into the language of the norm; while we continue, in secret, to practise a strange lingo that the law does not understand.' Stancikaitė's nod to the vanguard thinker's thought suggests this notion and approach might apply to both her images and art more broadly, too.

Adopting the same spirit of expansive and creative alterity, an other-worldly atmosphere of heightened sensation and arousal pervades Stancikaitė's art making. Take, for example, the painting *Common Language* (2024). In the composition, a pair of gloved hands shield a Venus mound on a hovering picture plane. Beneath another plane reiterates the same gloved hands like a shadowy double-exposure. Throughout Stancikaitė's paintings reference to photography and Avant-Garde photographic experimentation – techniques such as collage, or Man Ray's solarisation – but translated fastidiously using the old-school materials of pencil and paint. Here and in other compositions such as *Kūnai* (Bodies, 2024), painted folds not only formally delight but also evoke the naked hands or bodies they clothe. Masking, disguise, uncertainty about identity, gender, age and origins, and along with twining, sameness, symmetry and doubling-up appear in queer iconography throughout history and across cultures. These visual clues are of the kind that hope to be decoded, recognised by the like-minded or allied. But the artist's work also generates another kind of double-take too. By distancing her pictorial world from ours, she creates a liminal space for her protagonists to express their unbridled sensuality. And then, provocatively, allows us to become voyeurs into that strangely alluring, imaginary zone. It is then we become conscious of our own warm bodies enfolded by miraculous, neural receptor rich skin, and our own soft yearnings.

Desire is a complex *Ur*-emotion, a force with the gravitational pull of dark matter. Art always involves the unleashing of some kind of desire. Whereas some might desire power, for others, it is human connection, intimacy in which our bodies are the interfaces. It is novel to think of a painting as a flat body rather than an image, a window, or an object. Aren't they just as thin-skinned and achingly vulnerable, just as absolutely interdependent on its company and interaction as we are? Looking at the painting *Synaesthesia* (2024), seems more possible because the figure's eyes are covered by a glove. It is easier to look at someone not looking back at us (even if they are just a painting). It gives us permission to engage without the obligation of responding according to societal norms. And, as the title suggests, the artist also raises the confounding possibility of feeling by seeing, touching by looking. As we do, however, the figure made up in our heads might become a surface again; a field of pigmentation with fuzzy edges. Its painterly-ness returns. But even when a painting reveals itself as an illusionistic conjuring trick, it can be no less mesmerising. Paintings such as *Nauji krantai* (New Shores, 2024), depicting a *Rückenfigur* from multiple perspectives whose body looks like it is composed of stardust, oscillate between states in our perception.

Stancikaitė's paintings are meticulously spray-painted in acrylics, a technique that involves careful masking and hyper-controlled application, lung protection and a settling mist, in order to render sleek volumes, lines, curves and tonal shifts. Planning, stencils and steps characterise the time-consuming process rather than flashes of inspiration. She then only deploys a brush and oil paint to almost imperceptibly seal and tighten up the surface as well as to create highlights in a fashion reminiscent of doing sophisticated makeup. What emerges is a captivating lustre of graduated surfaces which invite the eye to linger on and glide across. For those familiar with the artist's recent work both in galleries and as an illustrator for magazines and periodicals, her embrace of painting and her new multi-toned palette and visual cosmology is striking. For these works the artist has evolved her signature monochrome popish pink into lush combinations of that 'shocking' hue, alongside disco-dusk-blue, that also merges in 'interstellar' late-night purple.

Stancikaitė's fields of colour, as well as her graphic and non-naturalistic figuration, evoke the sheen and reflectivity of industrial products, recalling everything from a century of car culture to AI generated advertisements on smartphone screens. Glossy spray-painted surfaces, seems almost synonymous with the gleaming face of modernity, now refracted infinitely through post-modernism. Modern spray-painting techniques in manufacturing first became widespread since the 1920s. Although, in terms of art history, the first sprayed-pigment images (using the mouth) over a stencil (the hand) was made in prehistoric times. In the 1920s, Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky experimented with 'sprayed' watercolour using sieves. After WWII, with the advent of commercial compressors, mid-20th century abstract artists like David Smith (1906-1965) also used the technique extensively. Arguably still now, despite decades since Pop art and the perfect industrial surfaces of Minimalism, part of the effective shock of the flatness of spray-painting entails what it is not. As the 21st Century has seen a massive resurgence of figurative painting, Stancikaitė's rejection of gestural handmade marks, the usual signs of authentic subject struggling viscerally at a canvas with a personal narrative or subjective burden, leaves us with a strange unfulfilled longing. We want even more what we can not have.

Further complicating our interpretation, the unexplained, non-referential, obsessively pursued, androgyny of Stancikaitė figures create projection fields open to queer receptions and projections. Take, for instance, a series of drawings more typically of her previous work, *Crossings I-V* (2024). The drawings feature a more or less identical androgynous face, sometimes in two halves reunited, like Narcissist in the mythological rather than the pathological sense, sometimes in stroboscopic multiplicity. Stancikaitė's eye has something in common with the intensity and brutal remove of a photographer like Robert Mapplethorpe, as well as Tom of Finland's love of kinky surfaces. Her world, like theirs, is infused with a stylised sex-positive carnality. When questioned about the origins or identity of her faces and figures, the artist noted: 'it's nobody... it is a generic face I always draw – the same androgynous face'. Every student of life drawing is confronted with the problem of naturally defaulting to drawing themselves instead of what is in front of them (others). Desire often involves dressing up, roleplay and drag on some level. The figure might be understood as an avatar, a fantastical hybrid, an amalgam.

Thinking more specifically of queer women as manifested in art brings us to more wild and surreal territory. The flat quality and leather glove motive in Stancikaitė's work, for example, recalls the Art Déco painting of Polish-born artist Tamara Łempicka (1894-1980). A cosmopolitan bisexual, Łempicka is best known for imagery puts women with gloved hands firmly behind the wheel of their own sports car. (For all the critique of modernity, sometimes it is forgotten that in its off-centre niches and experimental salons, alternative visions and modes of living and thinking flourished.) Her *Auto-portrait (Tamara in a Green*

Bugatti) (1929), was a commission for the cover of the German fashion magazine 'Die Dame'. In Stancikaitė's compositions *Hunger* (2024) and *Dance, dance* (2024) the influence of modernist aesthetic is apparent in the rhythmic stylisation, albeit subconsciously filtered through the legacy of disco culture such as in the work of legendary Richard Bernstein. His illustrations include an epic example of diva Grace Jones with her tongue protruding which was commissioned for Andy Warhol's 'Interview' magazine. Possibly because the artist was born and raised in post-Cold War Lithuania, I thought too of graphic Soviet ear poster art in particular, for example, examples celebrating the first female cosmonaut from the 1960s, but Stancikaitė told me any resemblance was purely coincidental.

Staring into the star-studded magic void of her *Dreamwalker* (2024), and thinking of gloves and mystic energies, brings to mind another artist who made her own rules in all matters. Leonor Fini (1906-1996), openly bisexual and polyamorous, famously expressed her formidable powers in her *Autoportrait au scorpion* (Self-Portrait with Scorpion, 1938) featuring a white glove and the disappearing tail of the insect. The purpose here of recalling examples of this lineage is to assert that Stancikaitė's queer images are not an isolated case, rather part of a rich dissident history of difference. On my recent studio visit, in conversation, the artist produced from a cupboard a long black leather glove that she uses to make the hand gestures in her paintings and worthy of a dominatrix. 'It has to be leather to get the good folds,' she noted, before laughing and turning back to her work.

Written by Dominic Eichler

About the artist

Aistė Stancikaitė works in monochromatic drawing and painting, achieving texture and depth with the detailed handling of tones of purple, red and blue. The artist challenges perceptions of reality by the sheer perfectionism of her approach. A significant part of her work deals with the human figure, the portrayed characters' anatomy and personality, appearing as both familiar acquaintances and fictional strangers. Through the effort to capture sensible details she demonstrates not only her technical skills but also her generosity towards the other.

Born in 1988 in Lithuania, Aistė Stancikaitė currently lives and works in Berlin.