

DOMINIC EICHLER:

*I was wondering if the dark painting 'Elsewhere' (2025) is abstract or not?
I see the suggestion of a figure in it – perhaps Caravaggio's narcissist looking in a pool...
but maybe that is just a hallucination on my part.*

MONIKA STRICKER:

You will be disappointed if I tell you what it is. I prefer your hallucination.

EICHLER:

Now you have to tell me!

STRICKER:

*It was based on a turtle. Can you see it?
But it is also my plunge into abstraction...**

The need to verify we are human is becoming more ubiquitous and urgent. Against this cultural backdrop, it is understandable in a non-intuitive way that old-fashioned easel painting remains the dominant form of contemporary art. This has to do, in part, with painting's bare all visceral immediacy. Every new support seems to offer itself up as a place for unfettered expression to painters eager to see what they might conjure. A primed painting readily absorbs traces of subjectivity. But paintings' anything goes *tabula rasa* also proves to be an illusion. The very first mark – good, bad or otherwise – ripples across the surface of the deep reservoir of inherited cultural knowledge inherent in the medium that is old as our genetic pool. And even after a painting comes to being, in the metaphorical sense, its surface never dries, its effusive production of meaning never ceases, and those meanings morph over time according to changing circumstances, ownership, and localities. In short, painting is *deceptively* simple, regardless of whom deploys what brushes.

Intriguing Dusseldorf based artist Monika Stricker came late to the discipline despite having graduated from her city's storied art academy once famed for its painting discourse. In fact, Stricker's own formal studies entailed a rigorous diet of discursive post-minimalist sculpture, not painting, even though in the institutional corridors painting was on everyone's mind and lips. Outnumbered, non-painters are fast to point out, somewhat disingenuously, that painting has dubious morals or is inherently sycophantic. And towing the line, Stricker also once viewed painting as a taboo. People had even warned her against donning the smock and questioned her approach and motives when she showed them her attempts. But adversity teaches, steels the resolve. And the idea of breaking the mould of received ideas exerts a considerable pull to the outsider or unconventional. Paradoxically, to decide to paint can be rebellious, although it is the preferred form at the market, just ask any another nonconformist Northern European figurative painter, like for instance, Maria Lassnig, Christa Näher, Cecilia Edefalk or Monika Baer, although there are many others alive and kicking today, and as the saying goes – 'sticking it to The Man'.

The title of Stricker's latest solo exhibition at her Brussels gallery dépendance is borrowed from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous unfinished and posthumously published 1782 eponymous book. This lends the proceedings a touch of post-Romanticism, especially as a quick survey of Stricker's new suite of paintings reveals multiple *alla prima* images – albeit with some over-painted sections – depicting sensitive young Homo sapiens males. These gentle subjects are the type of modern dreamers and poets that first emerged at the dawn of the industrial revolution in response to the perceived new weightiness of the world. The angle and intimacy of Stricker's paintings also give them an uneasy sexual frisson. Take, for instance, *Release* (2025), a reclining

twenty-some-year-old seen from the perspective of a bed companion surrounded by darkness. And then there is *Ever Closer, Ever Fonder* (2025), depicting a pretty goth laying wide awake – pale-skinned, red-lipped. The artist knows she is revealing herself by painting these imaginary young men. In the past, she has even painted them without a phallus or with an exposed scrotum.

Complicating matter furthers, as jarring motifs, other primates – chimps, gorillas, apes – also make an appearance alongside the fictional men in Stricker's compositions. This resultant anthropological/zoological dialogue has a long history. Examples of using the animal kingdom to address our own natures can be seen for instance, everywhere from Johann Joachim Kaendler's satirical porcelain *Monkey Orchestra* (18th century Meissen), to Robbie Williams' film *Better Man* (2024), a disturbed biographical chimp avatar in a tussle with a toxic conflagration of fame and mental illness. And while Stricker's own quizzical apes might be read as a feminist witticism about the brutishness of masculinity, it is also possible, as one of the artist's friends observed, that the artist herself is the animal in compositions like *L'Équipe* (The Team, 2025).

Some of Stricker's recent works have a surreal, dream-like quality and grope towards a partial, moody abstraction. Take compositions like *Moi Relâché* (Me Relaxed, 2025), that depict a floating eye ball. Here the faces and bodies of men and apes alike dissolve, or are erased, or brushed away, leaving only an eyeball, pitched at 90 degrees, and floating in a tonal field. People sometimes consider painting a *tromp l'oeil* window, where what you see is what you get. In this conception, the viewer peers into the artist's version of a strange world. For me, Stricker's painting suggests something different, namely the imagination of a painting as a patch of motley skin and by extrapolation the surrounding space as the rest of the unseen body. Some of her paintings even suggest that her faces might be embedded in the walls.

Often abruptly halted at the moment of becoming something, Stricker's paintings, vivid and vulnerable, startling and naked, are helpless against the judgement, musings and interpretation of beholders. For me, her gestural tentativeness signals conceptual flexibility, a capacity to capture nuance, ambiguity, the mysterious indeterminate qualities that keep us truly engaged. All the while, everything depends upon your vagrant point of view as the title of *Parallax* (2025) suggests – perhaps the gorilla and the curly redhead are both singing.

Written by Dominic Eichler, Berlin, February 2025