

CITY

Stefano Faoro & Birgit Megerle

Agence de voyage is happy to present CITY, an exhibition of works by Stefano Faoro and Birgit Megerle.

Imagine an urban population on a street corner. In CITY the show is organized like a snapshot, but the tableau is split into two parts, portraits on the walls and bodies in the room. Stefano Faoro has populated the space—an apartment in the 10th arrondissement of Paris, near the Gare de l'Est—with a crowd of mannequins clothed in outfits purchased at an outdoor market. These costumes accompany Birgit Megerle's drawings, mostly portraits from the waist up of people in various modes, turning to address the viewer.

Faoro composed, purchased and documented the outfits on weekly trips to a market in Bari, an industrial town on the eastern coast of southern Italy, in the region of Puglia. The outfits are a mix of new cheap clothing, produced absentmindedly by some massive international fast fashion junk manufacturing cycle, and thrift garments that have become stranded, waiting to be re-invested with some nominal value. Faoro chose the pieces intuitively, creating a kind of materialist survey of goods while also imagining characters who would wear such combinations. This romantic casting undermines the semi-conceptual routine and makes the work a kind of fiction or a painting.

The German painter Birgit Megerle's practice is similarly oriented toward sampling and observation. Megerle has been making compelling portraits of people in society for the last few decades. Amalgams of personal, political, and cultural figures, these 'people's' specificity blurs into a type of popular plurality while retaining—or creating—the very specific individuality of fiction. Drawn from photos found and taken by the artist, the backgrounds blur to obscure any too specific placement, while sometimes even across the faces expressive lights and colors intervene on their realism. In CITY there are only drawings by Megerle which reinforces the descriptive impulse of her depictions. Turning from their frames and looking out they redirect us to Faoro's figures.

If Megerle and Faoro produce a critique of society, it retains the important ambiguity of art. Their kind of social survey is like the mute observation of the analyst, statements reflected as questions: "Is that how it is?," and "How does that make you feel?." Maybe the subtext of the work is: how are you expressing yourself in this context; what does your image of you look like? When sourcing clothing or reference material—old magazine covers, snapshots of politicians and movie stars, pictures of friends—there is no important scientific conclusion to be made. No take away or truth about goods and trade flows or the construction of class and identity. What is important is the creation of a slight remove between experience and image. The image here is of an imaginary population of a city— much like the one you live in. A city you can only know by its fiction.

The specific type of fiction in CITY is cinema, which informs both artist's practices. Have you seen the German silent film 'Menschen am Sonntag'? Translated as 'People on Sunday' the movie follows a number of amateur actors playing characters—with the same real life jobs as themselves—over the course of a leisurely Sunday in Berlin. The tagline, "a film without actors" describes the program of the film, which was shot in a matter of fact style on a number of Sundays in Berlin in 1929. The film is an important work of the Neue Sachlichkeit movement (New Objectivity) founded in Weimar Germany. New Objectivity advocated for a turn away from the self involvement of expressionism and romanticism (which it held partially responsible for the horrors of the first world war) towards civic engagement and realism. While New Objectivity's objectivity had the realist impulse of a revelatory or restorative truth telling—a truth found in things, objects, reality—in literary history we find that there is nothing really altruistic about realism (exhibit A. its most prominent practitioners, the Victorians). The film succeeds most in its descriptive whimsy of the urban quotidian. See the opening medley of people crossing streets in the morning and feel a common feeling, the excitement of participating in being a population.

I find Megerle and especially Faoro's approach a little bit beyond realism. The term I am drawn to is 'Romantic Materialism.' It's not a very casual term, but I think it's relevant. It is first applied by some to the writing of Charles Darwin, whose unique blend of scientific method (materialism) and an enthusiastic supernaturalism (romanticism) leads to the publication of "On the Origin of Species." Gillian Beer (here quoted by Janis McLarren Caldwell) "traces Darwin's dual interest in imagination and the material world and argues that the resultant 'romantic materialism' drives him 'to substantiate metaphor, to convert analogy into real affinity.'" I find this an incredibly contemporary and beautiful summary of an approach to generating a working knowledge or image of the world, while incorporating an embedded complicatedness of appreciation.

Most likely the first piece you will see when you enter CITY is a drawing of a woman sitting at the piano in a costume, looking thoughtfully out of the frame. The image is drawn from a movie that you might recognize. Megerle's work sometimes describes professions specifically or figures in culture but not identities. These specificities, accoutrements—like the piano player's large mollusk shaped bonnet, are the roles her characters play, but behind them are amateur actors—imagined people—really real because they are more fictional than the source material. In front of the drawing is one of Faoro's characters, a woman in purple corduroys and a tee shirt with a big kiss on it. The filmic fiction of Faoro's costume and the imaginative recasting of Megerle's piano player both work to produce an image of people acting as images. While this theatricality undermines the objectivity of the materials and appropriated pictures—the realism of the critique—maybe it also adds something essential. A fiction that creates enough distance to see it. What is contemporary is almost invisible. The everyday has to be performatively redirected to make it appear.

-Graham Hamilton