



SALON 94

Ultra Arts Portland

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Through a Kaleidoscope, Darkly



Norbert Schwontkowski, courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash *Between*

Painting now after its great moment must come back to be a minor art.

Will be welcome

We will be welcome.

Gertrude Stein, *Saving the Sentence*, 1931

For his 1920 Dada sculpture, "Nature Morte: Portrait of Cézanne/Portrait of Renoir/Portrait of Rembrandt," Picabia attached a stuffed monkey to a wooden board and crudely painted the title around it. Painting is old-fashioned and silly, he seemed to be saying. Yet he kept painting.

Harry Swartz-Turfle, "Francis Picabia's Style Problem"*

Francis Picabia's are words invoked in the title of the current show Feldman Gallery and Project Space at [PNCA](#). "Between my head and my hand, there is always the face of death," is a show of easel paintings of the figure curated by [PICA's](#) Visual Art Curator, Kristan Kennedy.

TEMPTATION No. 1: STOP AT THE FIRST QUESTION

I'm going to start by asking the first question I asked when I walked in the door of the Feldman: Why a figure painting show? Why now?

Kennedy was invited by PNCA to curate a painting show. And Kennedy, a painter herself (Elizabeth Leach Gallery), resisted doing a show of abstract painting. "It was too easy, too close to me," she says. "I started with this painting by Norbert Schwontkowski that I saw in 2006 at the Armory show. It has this compelling mix of sweetness and darkness. In the sea of everything else there, all this big sculptural work, there was this traditional moment: looking in the window of the frame of the painting. And at the same time there were these dead, fleshy colors that I love. It stayed on my mind."

For a small show, “Between my head...” is expansive, fragmenting the notion of figure painting into myriad rectangular planes as if through a kaleidoscope, darkly.



Amy Bessone, courtesy of David Kordansky

There are Amy Bessone’s broad black gestural brushstrokes tracing a kneeling figure in “Untitled (Nude with Ochre)” that make the still figure as dynamic as the hand (or arm really) that swung over its contours. And this is not to mention the ochre of the title playing of the criminally rich green-blues of the ground. (There are a couple “studies” by Bessone as well, simple black profiles on flat backgrounds that would be an effective tracing of process if there’d been a dozen hung side by side.) There are a series of fairly academic nudes by Kaye Donachie with geometric planes of obscuring shadow and faces (but one) obscured by loose brushstrokes. And there are two stop-motion animation works by Tala Madani featuring primitively painted, dark-haired male figures, as Kennedy puts it, “in compromising positions.” And as if to emphasize range here, the salon-style grouping avec houseplant (I want to title it “The Quick and the Dead”) of Elena Pankova’s old-school-Colorforms-meets-Constructivist faces neighbor Grant Barnhart’s masked self-portrait in his studio stacked with canvases (painted after Picasso, among others).



Barnhart's masked figure buried under the literal weight of art history, a little disturbing with its lumpy-fingered hand, is kind of a microcosm of the Centre Pompidou show of figure painting from which I believe this show means to take its cue. *Cher Peintre/Dear Painter* was a 2002 group exhibition which, like Barnhart, attempted to situate contemporary artists in an historical lineage commencing with Francis Picabia's late, not-so-great paintings of women whose subjects were taken from girlie mags. Like the painters in that show, these painters do not paint from life and we are to understand that they are engaged in projects that are something more than painting paintings, e.g. Bessone's studies as illuminating process and the physicality of painting, Barnhart on constructed selves, constructed (re)presentations.

TEMPTATION No. 2: ROMANTICIZE

It's tempting to write romantically about the return to the figure in an era in which writers write that many of our interpersonal interactions are mediated by technology. But I think that argument holds more water in considering participatory/social practice work. After all the painted figure is figure mediated by the material and the hand of the artist, n'est-ce pas?

What of the title of the show? It's a Francis Picabia quote, and an odd one. Because it says that every act of making, initiated by the head, executed by the hand, is filtered through/affected by a contemplation of mortality. Is artmaking then an effort to live on after death via one's paintings? Or does the thought that one might live on via that particular painting trouble its production?

It's worth considering that Picabia's own figure paintings are kind of a kiss off to legacy, *Rage Against the Machine lyrics* sung by a privileged heir. That he would deviate from some of his more innovative works to make a series of old fashioned figure paintings suggests he didn't give a fig for legacy. There's something to this rebelliousness that, regardless of what you see on the canvas, must be coursing through the blood of these painters who persist in painting the figure. After all, Boris Groys has pointed out that non-art image-making industries are much more efficient than art at making and distributing images, and I think that goes double for images of the body. When asked why he painted another series of fairly traditional works, Picabia apparently said something like, "Because I felt like it." Few can get away with Picabia's brand of cavalier insouciance so while that may be the reason all of these works are made...a painter must paint...there is, behind many of these paintings something else. And yet...

TEMPTATION No. 3: TALK BEYOND

Kristan Kennedy writes, in her essay on the project, about the mirror held up to the viewer by these works. (VU's "I'll be your mirror.") This just plays into my temptation to talk beyond what is here on the canvas to what might be behind it. Shows like *Dear Painter* set this situation up (the tendency is widespread when it comes to paintings of the figure) in an admission, I think, that barring work by a very few artists, none of the painting itself is so different than painting you've seen before. (Ditto Picabia's women.)

Merlin James actually attaches some kind of fiber, maybe hair, to the canvas of the dark, muddy "Untitled (Finger)" (which for some reason my brain wants to call "THE Finger") in a pubic tangle. The visceral nature of these "hairs" (that incidentally are also dispersed randomly across the figure as if from a cheap paintbrush) by breaking the picture plane remind the viewer of the hand of the artist more than a brushstroke ever could. But the material detail of the fibers (as well as the finger that gives the piece its subtitle) transforms the piece from the play on Courbet's "L'Origine du monde" that it is, into Duchamp's last work "Etant donnés" and beyond. Cue Joan Jett's *Do You Wanna Touch Me*.

THE LAST TEMPTATION OF

As the brain wrestles with spiraling off into the why's and wherefore's of appropriation and remake, the material detail of the "Untitled"'s fibres demands that we refocus on the surface of the canvas, on what we see right now. And maybe that's the point here: as painting is painting, looking is looking. Perhaps we should clam up, really look, and let that be enough.

-Lisa Radon



APPENDIX

See [more documentation of the show](#).

Playlist:

Velvet Underground (I'll be your mirror)

Talking Heads (Once in a Lifetime. "you may ask yourself, how did I get here? ...same as it ever was")

Joan Jett (Do You Wanna Touch)

Rage Against the Machine (Killing in the Name Of)

Other things that came up in the jukebox mind over the long course of thinking about this work.

...full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Macbeth Quote (Act V, Scene V). (Be advised: not to include the part about the tale told by an idiot.)

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. 1 Corinthians 13

O wad some Power the giftie gie us

To see oursels as ithers see us!

Robert Burns, "To A Louse"

* Harry Swartz-Turfle, "[Francis Picabia's Style Problem](#)"