

# arte\_e critica

## UNLIMITED FREEDOM

by Maria Chiara Valacchi

SATURATED COLOUR AND MARKED HISTORICAL REFERENCES. SHORT REFLECTIONS ON THE PAINTING OF SOME ARTISTS BORN IN THE EIGHTIES.

In June of last year, the artist Nicolas Party (Switzerland, 1980) placed, in the garden of Samuel Leuenberger's SALTS space, one of his most monumental works, *PANORAMA*, a large wooden parallelepiped entirely painted in hues ranging from white to blue.



Nicolas Party, *Panorama*, 2015. Courtesy the artist and SALTS, Basel.

Just like the sacred monolith loaded with meanings that Kubrick placed on the earth inhabited only by primates, the huge cube enveloped the spaces of the gallery, reproducing on the exterior walls numerous motifs of eighteenth-century painting. On a rigorous texture with vertical bands, faces and still lifes winked at the artistic experience of Matisse, Vallotton, an early Picasso and Morandi, resolved with a studied personal formalism. For contemporary artists like Party, the dialogue with the past appears, thus, open, helped by Time that seems to spare art, making it always topical. If the new generations have often been accused of a kind of historical amnesia dedicated to a search for one's own identity, understandable so, painters like Party don't fear similarity and play on rendering contemporary languages that are already fully metabolized. After all, art history, for decades now, since it has no longer been inscribed in a linear trend – from invention to its overcoming – has offered the artist the possibility to draw on the aesthetic rules of other ages with unlimited freedom. The attributed

communicative aphasia of some coeval works appears totally surpassed by the re-appropriation of a literary and narrative language that renews itself focusing on the subject stripped of any symbolism or conceptual superstructure.



Brian Calvin, *Amnesia*, 2015, Almine Rech, Paris - Courtesy Artist and Almine Rech, Paris.

As Party says, the ambition of a painter is to reach the body and brain of the viewer although interfacing with a flat surface on which an illusory image is defined, which can take on greater emphasis trespassing from the canvas to the wall surface. In this way the concept of Decoration is restored, in its highest semantic meaning of functional interaction, without undermining the sacredness of painterly expression. A glaring example is the *Capsule Collection* that Raf Simons created in 2013 for Dior man, using the works by the Californian painter Brian Calvin. Chosen for the intrinsic message of his canvases and not exclusively for the formal beauty of the subjects, the stylist himself defines Calvin's work stating: "Calvin paints people that don't really care, they are happy with their environment. Comfortable."



Brian Calvin, *Hours*, installation view at Almine Rech, Paris, 2015. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech, Paris.

What Calvin creates is a world inhabited by invented faces that suggest stories wrested from temporality, since he is not consequently interested in the narrative development of the artwork. For Calvin, the work lives beyond a definite sense and celebrates this emphasizing the intensity and specificity of painting with the light and realism of the traits; his figures are full of personality but deprived of passion, faces with big half-open mouths and suspended gazes that don't communicate responses but create questions. Dull, they only appear touched by a slight melancholy.



Brian Calvin, *Rare Air*, 2015, Almine Rech, Paris - Courtesy Artist and Almine Rech, Paris.

The power of representation is no longer necessarily submitted to an idea, its validity radiates through an emotional retina, rapid and accessible, restoring the incipit of the work by many contemporary artists among whom the Russian painter Sanya Kantarovsky (Russia, 1982) stands out. Always fascinated by the incorruptible readability of figuration, for his research he seems to borrow the theorem “we’re an imageridden society and we’re imagemakers” from Philip Guston. Kantarovsky tackles the work with a voyeuristic approach and treats the canvases as windows in which to inscribe unreal circumstances of his formal memory. Complex compositional devices are in balance with thin and twisted figures, which seem to relate to the external life, stimulating a contemplative tension made up of colour and intentional structural mistakes. Kantarovsky uses a comic-strip language, a biting and omnipresent drawing that at the same time gives inertia and instability to the canvas. For his exhibition at the Studio Voltaire in London, he focuses on the study of devotional Tibetan painting, on the Neue Sachlichkeit, the Wanderers and the Russian realism of the nineteenth-century Peredvizhniki; everything is suggested, never made explicit, leaving total freedom of interpretation to the viewer. As Crispolti wrote, “The personal language of an artist is defined precisely in the transformation, the metabolization that he connotatively carries out of the contextual visual denotation... And the contextual visual denotation thus remains an evident prerequisite of the connotation of a personal language...”.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *Yesterday and Today*, 2014 - Courtesy Artist and Casey Kaplan, New York.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *Allergies (What Little Else I Remember of You)*, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York.

If the disintegration of the Individual was the means, throughout the twentieth century, to free oneself from history, what seems evident in the research of the artist of Latvian origin but American by adoption, Ella Kruglyanskaya (Latvia, 1978), is the centrality of the figure of woman as a renewed contemporary archetype of beauty. Described as a sovereign figure who dominates the geometry of the painting, she appears at the same time as a prosperous and angular entity, with big lacquered mouths and bewitching eyes.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *Effacement*, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.



Sanya Kantarovsky, *Gutted*, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

In her female representation there's no aspiration towards a Romantic ideal or an ideal of redemption, on the contrary her body-centred presence appears schematic, only enclosed by sharp colour contrasts, with a rapid application, in order to quickly convey the features of a personality. Kruglyanskaya's reproduction of the modern and post-feminist woman appears schizophrenic and shining, as indeed she herself states: "I did not want to be a good woman artist. I just wanted to be a great painter."



Ella Kruglyanskaya, *How to work together*, Studio Voltaire, London. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown, New York.



Ella Kruglyanskaya, *Zip It*, 2014 - Courtesy Artist and Gavin Brown, New York.

The motif of the body persists and also characterizes the work by Jonathan Gardner (Kentucky, 1982). He subjectivizes and changes it into a codification of *non-realistic* idioms with a modernist flavour; the object of the gaze is the medium and no longer the aim of the realization of an artwork. Breasts, busts and faces are devoid of any symbolic identification and become constituent elements of an *indoor* scenario. The landscape, no longer portrayed from life, loses the peculiarity of fixing the natural development of time and light and becomes object of a mnemonic pictorial management, which for Gardner reveals itself in the two-dimensionality of the backgrounds and in the light-dark textures of the details. The rhetorical suggestions of Fernand Léger, Balthus, Edward Burra and René Magritte are the principles on which he bases works with a comfortable imaginary and suspended dynamics.



Grace Weaver, *Détente*, 2014. Courtesy Soy Capitán, Berlin.

Similar in formalism, but pushed towards a marked tonal study, is the work by Grace Weaver (Vermont, 1989) who uses colour to structure an engineering system made up of narrative levels, penetrated and shifted on the same surface. The absent perspective thus becomes functional to the linear elaboration of all the scenes simultaneously included in the canvas. There is no longer a single viewpoint on which the optical beams converge, on the contrary they are multiple and levelled; a pre-Brunelleschi vision of the scene. The colour actively participates in the implementation of an atmosphere that is planned on colour contrasts and nuances with strong symbolic distinguishing marks.



Grace Weaver, *Getaway*, 2015 - Courtesy Artist and Soy Capitán, Berlin.

For Weaver, as for Kantarovsky, Oriental art is strongly appealing, extended limbs and unreal positions are articulated to define a highly evocative texture. Scenarios composed like a *Schlaraffenland* suggest Boccaccio, Grimm and Brueghel the Elder-style settings and they open to numerous grotesque narratives. Young, educated and painting lovers, this group of painters born around the eighties build their research with no mediations or intrusions of other apparatuses, devoting themselves to an aware re-elaboration of past art; a generational awakening that seems freely inspired by T.S. Eliot's thinking: "Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future, and time future contained in time past".



Grace Weaver, *Sunday Brunch w-bb*, 2015. Courtesy the artist and Soy Capitán, Berlin.