

Zooming in: Marks of Identity, Game of Contexts

We use marks and objects to circumscribe identity. Marks and objects tell stories and construct symbolic contexts, signify personality traits or socially shaped behaviour. Even when one does not have other investigatory tools with which to work upon the field of identity, there are always visual details, accessories and objects that function as signifiers of it or as indicial attributes of individual or group personality. These can signal the inclusion of the person within a collective frame of habits and socially informed behaviour or, on the contrary, the personal attempts to break away from that structural web.

The paintings that Marius Bercea brings together within the "Soft Snapshots with Gentle Atmosphere" exhibition mainly describe an approach, namely that of the eye scrutinizing visual reality in search for a significant target that is to be revealed and analyzed. Scanning the crowd is the first episode of an investigative visual saga that is supposed to have as its purpose the discovery of the objective common denominator of individual identities. The target-person seems to be selected in a random manner, since there is nothing to distinguish one potential subject of investigation from another, no privileged persona that would stand out as prominent at first glance. The imaginary eye moves relentlessly, scanning and gradually piercing the "surface" of the crowd. The impersonal, abstract and invasive gaze that is making this disturbing aerial surveillance belongs both to the artist and the spectator, who is invited, even forced to take part in this search for the significant detail.

The human figures in the paintings sometimes look like they are haunting rather than inhabiting the space in which they move and act. Stencil-like or, on the contrary, richly pigmented and sensuously constructed on the surface, they interrelate in a strange manner with the surrounding space. One way or another, Marius's "characters" always seem to be involved in some actions, but the exact purpose of their actions and wanderings is never plainly explained by the images, which reveal themselves as pictures of frozen movements of people "floating" in ambiguous spatial settings (and surrounded by a disquieting atmosphere that somewhat resembles that of Juan Muñoz's big and arresting installations).

The bag, especially the shopping bag, is the surprising final point of the search. As shopping instrument, the bag is always alluding to a consumerist society, to a dynamic of consuming goods. The bag is the recipient that helps you carry as many products as possible, as comfortably as possible. But it is also itself a commodity and a signifier of social identity, a visual mark of it. In this respect, the bag can be just as meaningful as one's clothing or accessories. But nevertheless, banal and usually unattractive, yet almost omnipresent in the streets, it can also function as reminder of the fact that we are relentlessly carrying something with us, whether commodities, memories, fears or hopes.

The format of the paintings in the show varies as does the painterly approach of the surface: most of the painted works tend to favour a sensuous chromatic, a mildly gestural rendering of shapes that induces a sensation of both visual freshness and paradoxically minimalist pigmentary richness. But the same sensorial qualities are attained also when deploying different technical approaches, as can be witnessed in the works that focus on a rather graphic, almost sketchy rendering of the image, some of which also make use of a broad perspective and reference seventeenth century Dutch paintings (works like Avercamp's landscapes with skaters) or even earlier painterly endeavours such as those of Peter Breugel the Elder.

Though media appropriated or photographically originated, the painted images of Marius Bercea are not meant to be photorealistic. They are all the time maintained within an area where the expressive values are praised above the purely mimetical rendering. The figurative realm comes naturally to Marius Bercea, without technical or conceptual hesitations, and this Romanian artist tries to enrich the realistic vein that his pictures undoubtedly incorporate with a lyrical emphasis and visual sensuality.

The types of spaces that the artist constructs don't necessarily suggest site specificity, but nevertheless they tend to sometimes allude to the post communist, early capitalist Romania, just as some of the human silhouettes in the pictures also do. But the socio-political references never suffocate the psychological realm, just as the psychological realm doesn't impeach on the aesthetic pleasure provided by the image itself. In the end, the artist brilliantly manages to make his art both responsive to a social and cultural context and aesthetically appealing, while also succeeding in avoiding empty technical showing-off and fake political pseudo-commitments.

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