

“Paint is like mud and can be drawn out into trails and strokes like dangling vines, tendrils or branches. It can make a clean white shape, like a canoe, or a broken inchoate mess of spatters, like a sudden cough or wind-whipped sleet. Paint can be like air or light, or solid as a bronze fire hydrant or a man’s head or a truck”. – Adrian Searle¹

Low Quality Love

Hani Zurob

Our recent history appears, at first glance, primarily as a history of acceleration – from the development of ever faster means of transportation, to shorter and farther reaching channels of communication, to the Fordian heritage of optimized production methods – all of which have continuously increased the pace of life since the 19th century. Art has certainly represented the upper echelon of these developments, when the avant-garde embraced speed and technical advancements, when Italian Futurists proclaimed the achievements of industrialization, and when kinetic art enlightened the art world with the incorporation of the laws of physics.

Yet, art also has the power to decelerate. As early as around 1900, people spoke of the ‘Age of Nervousness’, and ever since then warnings have been plenty – from Fritz Lang’s epochal *Metropolis* to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. More recently is the picture Marshall McLuhan drew of the ‘visual homogenising of experience’ starting in the 1960s, which has confronted us with the impact of media on our societies and social interactions.

Today, in the age of globalisation, turbo-capitalism and instant communication, the yearning for deceleration is growing. Digitalisation and the Internet led to a quantum leap in the global culture of communication, while simultaneously alienating us. The unknown territories of advanced technology and virtual realities result in anxiety and disillusionment, in anonymity and detachment. With alienation and the homogenization of personal expression come strangely detached expressions of love and affection.

It may be precisely this state of human interaction that allows social and political injustice to rule. As Hani Zurob said, ‘These days, we are living in a world defined by injustice. The situation where I come from is the best example of that.’ The material, territorial and political all hold increasingly superior positions in our global society, which has painfully coloured the artist’s own biography.

Hani Zurob examines this moment of alienation, estrangement and injustice from a painterly perspective. After years of depicting the world around him and making art that was strongly tied to his own autobiographical experiences, he has now taken up a far more universal theme. Thus, space was created that has allowed him to focus on his individual, personal quest for something more haptic: the thorough examination of painting. He has asked what painting can do, what layers of paint can do, and which traces he can weave into the visual narration and structure of each artwork.

¹ Adrian Searle: *A Kind of Blankness*, in: *Peter Doig*, Phaidon: London, 2007. Pp. 50-103, here pg. 70.

In *Excuse me Peter Doig: this is "Canoe-Sea"* the shadow of the boat casts gently on the turquoise water. In a motionless moment, a heart sits on a skiff, without pulsating, yet not without life. The flesh is, however, detached from a body and slowly turning black, dying. The romanticism of the image, and its weirdness too, recalls the sentimentalism of Arnold Böcklin's *Die Toteninsel (The Island of the Dead)* where the background is left as an abstract composition, turning the water into a cyan colour field. Here the subject, a heart that has replaced the human being rowing a boat through the water, creates a strange duality of realities. The endless expanse of landscape contrasts with the barely-there reflection of the boat and missing shadow of the heart on the water's surface. Each intentional decision builds upon the last until a certain psychological impact has been achieved, just under the surface, and the viewer is tasked with unearthing it.. Here we have the artist's protest against a heartless, lifeless world, where a heart without veins, without a blood supply, remains the only living object within its depicted surroundings.

Zurob has borrowed the image of the boat from another painter's work, Scottish artist Peter Doig, who has repeatedly included the motif in his work. He first used the canoe in late 1987, reportedly after watching Sean Cunningham's horror movie *Friday the 13th*. In the movie, a boat is used in one of the last scenes. Doig has described his impression of it as being, 'more like a romantic dream when you remove it from its context'.² He places a person in the boat – a dreaming, dreamlike figure who has no clear destination. When borrowing the motif from Doig, Zurob replaces the human figure with a dying heart. He lessens the possibilities of identifying the depicted figure, while attempting to portray a situation rather than an individual experience.

Type any name is the title of another painting, inviting the spectator to do so. Haven't we all been confronted with this phenomenon? Here we see a heart with no veins attached to it again; no body connects to its beating, blood-saturated flesh. Underneath it is, 'type in any name', and further down we discover a dead corpse, laid out on the bottom of the canvas. While Zurob has appropriated image elements from Doig, one of the 20th century's most prominent painters, he also dug deeper into art history when he appropriated Hans Holbein the Younger's *Le Christ au Tombeau* – the depiction of Christ's dead body. The image caught the artist's attention due to an ironic detail – the middle finger straightened out from the palm, as if suggesting a solid curse, a vulgar exclamation of "f*** you" coming from a dead corpse. To render the body the paint has been applied far thicker than on the rest of the canvas, juxtaposing the human form with the undefined space around it. By doing so, Zurob is breaking the skin, or the painted surface, thus suggesting the fragmentation of the body.

This recent series of paintings documents a quest, or an examination of painting itself. The artist composes elements, combining both abstract as well as figurative forms, applying collage as well as *décollage*. He paints and rips the layers of colour off the canvas with geometrical strips of tape. He experiments with different materialities, using gold leaf and even applying the paint on the canvas in such thick layers that fissures and gouges result automatically during the drying

² Peter Doig quoted in *ibid*.

process. While creating each artwork, Zurob turns the canvas multiple times, thus changing the alignment. Unlike other artists, he does not make preliminary sketches of the paintings. The results are based on an intuitive creative process and shifting dynamics within the making. Therefore the entire structure and narrative of an artwork is created within the act of applying its materials upon the canvas. When Zurob takes the materiality of paint into account – its various effects such as three-dimensionality, transparency or coverage, or colour psychology – he makes it part of the articulation of the motif. Painting and paint is not a tool, but an integral part of the narrative within each art work.

Paintings, and its materiality, carry meaning through their visual range and Zurob appropriates this capacity to bring forward the overarching theme of his new series. Alarmed by the overwhelming impact of technology on mankind, Marshall McLuhan questioned the "blessings" of our time. The artist now investigates this matter from the most intimate and personal angle: its impact on love and on our ability to love each other. What we love is what we desire. But what can we desire, when the object of our longing is virtual and so are the expressions of our appreciation?

Zurob's paintings move between the real and the metaphorical, the actual and the fictive. From the layers of paint and singular motives, we – the spectators – may be misguided in expecting a conclusion, as a narrative would most likely offer us. There is no end, just as there are no starting points in the stories we may interpret from reading the artist's paintings. If they narrate anything, than it is only a single chapter of a much larger volume, telling an ongoing story that is far from being finished. Instead, dream-like realities, different material activations, and the questioning of premeditated compositions result in a cumulative expressiveness, which we – as the spectators – are invited to investigate.

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