

TURIN

Sanya Kantarovsky

FONDAZIONE SANDRETTO RE REBAUDENGO

Amid the public displays of penitence in the #MeToo era, the knee-jerk qualifier “as a father” has been particularly maligned for its implication that parenthood is somehow a prerequisite for possessing respect for human dignity. At the same time, there is a specific torment to being a parent in a moment when the monsters under the bed have been revealed as more than just shadows, and the helplessness of the child is openly matched by that of the parents, who can never fully shield their offspring against the abuses rampant in the world.

Sanya Kantarovsky mined this double vulnerability in his gut-wrenching solo presentation “Letdown.” The New York-based painter has developed a signature style that recuperates the visual vocabulary of Soviet satire as a formal device, endowing his figures with the laconic features and Plasticine anatomies one might have encountered in the pages of Moscow’s satirical magazine *Krokodil*. For “Letdown,” Kantarovsky built on this bittersweet nostalgic tone by staging a selection of recent paintings in an environment that revisited aspects of his own childhood in the Soviet Union. The artist covered one entire gallery wall with a cornflower-colored print of the facade of a *Khrushchyovka*, an iconic form of Soviet public housing predicated on uniformity. As a finishing touch, he added a set of brightly painted metal *cherepashki* (turtles), ingenious Soviet playground staples consisting of climbable concentric circles arranged to suggest tortoise shells.

The scene depicted in *Kompleks*, 2016, is set against the backdrop of one such housing project, which is laid out across the horizon like a mausoleum. In the foreground is a child in an indigo-tinged bicorne, his right eye ribbed in the same shade of gray as his thin lips. His wrist dangles limply in the grip of an adult woman,

who is cropped out of the image, leaving only her bronze-hued taffeta skirt buffeting in her wake. Hovering over the child is a solemn man in a long black coat. His bowed head is flushed a cinnamon shade, and his fingers hang over the boy’s hat as if he were choosing a pastry from a bakery window. And yet whether the man’s intentions are sinister remains unclear. Perhaps he is only trying to help?

Escalation, 2017, on the other hand, leaves little doubt as to where the blame lies, in its brutal portrayal of a tiny broken body, bared from the waist down. The child’s legs are pulled in close, its hips and anus marred with a muddied maroon. Above the body, a bald, amphibian-eyed man thrusts his toothless jaw forward in mournful supplication, offering up two sets of clasped rheumatic hands. In *Gutted*, 2016, a bloated adult body is seen in repose, all in white with gray boots. Once more, the head is out of the frame, but an elephantine index finger trails possessively along the forearm of a young boy, sitting upright in the middle of a bed. His teal face sprouts woozily from his turtleneck—his only visible item of clothing—but his expression remains horrifically vacant. The boy’s knees are burnished a curdled pink, to echo both the area around his mouth and the clouds ejaculating from the smokestack outside the window.

As raw as these images are, the show’s heart-stopper was probably the painting after which it was titled. *Letdown*, 2017, depicts a young mother, naked and nearly doubled over as she struggles through murky shin-high sludge. Her stony cerulean arms are thrust upward in prayer or possibly restraint, as a crimson-faced infant presses its mottled pink mass against her back, one chubby arm reaching forward to grab her teat. The woman’s battered elbows and knees speak to a repeated failing (or at least a falling), a terrible powerlessness to help her infant, reflecting the observer’s own powerlessness before such spectacles of distress.

—Kate Sutton

Sanya Kantarovsky, *Letdown*, 2017. Oil, watercolor, and pastel on canvas, 85 × 65”.

