

Sanya Kantarovsky Makes His Paintings Perform

by Scott Indrisek, Modern Painters



An installation view of Sanya Kantarovsky's "What Were You Expecting, Mr. Milquetoast, a Plot?" Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, 2014

(Photo by Stephan Baumann/Courtesy the Artist and Casey Kaplan, New York)



Sanya Kantarovsky's "Lumpenproletariat #2," 2013. Courtesy the Artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

A few months ago, [Sanya Kantarovsky](#) was in his Brooklyn studio, telling me about a certain type of Russian poster — popular following the death of Stalin — that exploited a very unique palette. “Things didn’t have to be red and happy and healthy anymore,” he said, “and all of a sudden, this public imagery had colors that reflected jaundiced skin, alcohol, bile, vomit, and dirt — quite abject, in this caged way.” For his latest series of paintings, [on view in the exhibition “Allergies” at Casey Kaplan Gallery](#) in New York through June 21, Kantarovsky borrowed some of these tones to enact his own unnerving contemporary scenarios. (He’ll also be engaging more directly with the poster format for a show in Riga, Latvia, this June, in collaboration with Ella Kruglyanskaya.)

The artist has always been concerned with the emotional and referential underpinnings of certain tones and pigments — his earlier paintings were lit by a “kind of Berlin dusk over everything,” he said. Those works generally feature a lone figure walking or sitting within an abstracted environment: They are mostly men, all with comically expressive limbs; Kantarovsky is a master of five-fingered communicative nuances. “I’m interested in the archetype of a person — like Jacques Tati, who’s a vessel of projection for *anyone*,” he said, referring to the French film actor and star of “Playtime.” “He’s a generic person. I was interested in this character as a sort of marionette I could move around, coming up with experiences that feel familiar and yet singular.” The semi-anonymous nature of these protagonists often meant that they were partially obscured, hidden by hats or hands (“As soon as you paint eyeballs, it becomes super specific.”) In these new paintings, we start to see faces and expressions — like the mischievous smirk on the man in “Kolobok,” 2014, who appears to be ogling something just beyond the borders of the canvas. The focus on solo figures has also shifted a bit to include groups: “Speaking His Language” features a young woman, her face hidden, bare rear exposed to the viewer. “It’s about people being together but very suspicious of each other,” Kantarovsky said. “They’re very far apart, in subtle ways.”

For the artist, a painting is rarely just a painting on its own: It's a node in a larger relational body that includes the exhibition space itself and sculptures — including carefully choreographed screens, or suspended railings — that affect how the work is received. For his Casey Kaplan show, the installation is focused more squarely on the canvases themselves, with larger pieces interrupted by assemblies of small works (like the subtly shocking “Casual Pleasure,” a watercolor-and-pastel work depicting a dapper man calmly contemplating his penis). “The painters I really love manage to throw the status of a painting up into the air for the viewer to grab onto,” he said. “The best ones can make a great painting but still have it function as part of a larger system. But it's very easy to devalue a painting in that way — for it to become purely a prop — and I'm not interested in that.”

“There are already so many things about painting that are belated, weird, and strange,” Kantarovsky continued. “There are so many ways in which it can perform. Why not make it do everything it can do?”

A version of this article appears in the May 2014 issue of Modern Painters magazine.