

We are all in the Gutter

Sanya Kantarovskys paintings at Tanya Leighton Gallery

by Katharina Pencz

“In the Gutter” is how Sanya Kantarovsky titled his show at Tanya Leighton. Who or what is in the Gutter or in other words has hit rock bottom is left unclear. One might assume the young man from Moscow, born there in 1982 and now based in New York, who is particularly known for his figurative and abstract painting, is a pessimist.

In fact his characters gaze down upon the onlooker from the canvas, mostly with a sad or anxious air. The exhibition title does not reveal: it is an extract of the quote “We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars” from “Lady Windermere’s Fan”, a comedy by Oscar Wilde.

The “Gutter” is also the space between different panels in a comic, an ambiguity that proves more than just artistic humour. Indeed, it is precisely this omitted information:

a void that needs filling and which is almost more interesting than the obvious work itself in this exhibition.

In the foreground of “Mind the Gap”, 2016 - the name again an allusion to the “in-between”, a dark-haired woman bends down to her dog, who is stretching his tongue up to reach her. In the left lower corner a little boy is standing with a deeply flushed (perhaps with rage?) face, while in the background a man is standing in an archway catching a glimpse of the scene. But why is the man so amazed? Why the kid so irate? And which figure does the dog belong to?

Kantarovsky’s paintings, reminiscent of illustration or comics, are full of curious stories, but don’t disclose much about their protagonists.

Instead these become associative features, which enable us as viewers to spin an entirely personal story about it. Or one projects the seen directly onto oneself. With a determined, energetic brushstroke Kantarovsky creates irritatingly relatable situations.

The rather obvious motive of “Featherweight” is that of a man dragging a figure on his back. The load is anything but a featherweight- the man walks visibly bent forward. One can almost hear his heavy breath, feel the burden on ones own back. This awareness of ones own body was probably also the painter’s intention for



Woman, Dog,
Child, Man:
“Mind the
Gap”, 2016,
Oil/Water-
color

“Abogado”. A man lying in a pool of spilled red wine, in front of him a blank piece of paper, behind him the Abogado, (advocate) comforting the lying man with an embrace. Is he perhaps the character lifting the helpless up again, giving him support, when the blank sheet absolutely does not want to fill itself, when creativity takes a break?

Does one possibly see the artist in a creative crisis here, equivalent to the “Gutter” to him?

The subject is as ambivalent as the subliminal affect of Kantarovsky’s imagery.

In any case the possibilities of interpretation are endless.