

THE
CARTOON NETWORK

Illustration and art history
collide in **Sanya Kantarovsky's** paintings
by Scott Roben

'Code-switching' is a term that describes the tendency of two or more multilingual speakers to alternate between languages, or language registers, during a single conversation or even a single sentence. More than just a question of toggling, code-switching itself can influence meaning, at least insofar as the exact point of the switch is often decided by subtle social and cultural cues. It crossed my mind while thinking about Sanya Kantarovsky's paintings, which slide so deftly, sometimes nearly imperceptibly, between visual idioms. They navigate not just styles but the particular histories that formed them and the distinct expressive structures that underlie them – all of this, more often than not, with a bit of a wink.

First and most obviously, there's an illustrational style in Kantarovsky's work that relies heavily on drawing: calligraphic marks outlining willowy figures in black shoes and bowlers, light bulbs and walking sticks. These characters seem to have arrived, if somewhat the worse for wear, from the world of gag cartoons, channelling the graphic wit of cartoonists such as Saul Steinberg or maybe even, with their dandyish charm and dream-like appearances, the early-20th-century comics of Winsor McCay – to pose just two possibilities from what's surely an endless list of references. Then there are the highly mannered painted spaces they inhabit, which contain a great deal of visible brushwork and make references sprawling from Fauvism to postwar Russian poster design. Kantarovsky certainly isn't the only artist working today

who's putting cartoon illustration into contact with, or alongside, a painting practice. (Vittorio Brodmann, Trevor Shimizu, Amy Sillman and Amelie von Wulffen are some varied examples that reveal only the tip of the iceberg.) However, the peculiar ways in which he impels the two to make meaning together – within the bounds of the same frame, shape or even line – are what keep me looking.

Cartoons, especially the type of single-frame gag cartoons that Kantarovsky's canvases gesture toward, frequently depend on some kind of text for their meaning – a caption, a speech bubble, a magazine article. Kantarovsky's paintings, though, are resolutely mute. Take, for instance, *You Expected Something Different* (2013), in which a veil of transparent white paint covers up what appears to have been a very quick, all-over gestural composition, leaving only a small rectangle in the top-right corner. The exposed rectangle reads like an unframed canvas hanging on a wall, and its scale is suggested by two feet resting on a side table, added as a final layer in the foreground. There's something slightly precarious about the whole set-up: the half-concealed underpainting, the feet that seem prone to slip off the table at any moment, the table itself which appears to be missing one of its curved metal ornaments. There's a sense of a punchline, somewhere, but just when you feel as though you're on the verge of uncovering it, you're funnelled right back into the picture. You want to 'get' the joke,

but it's a dead end. In the same way that many paintings are devised with an inbuilt tension that discourages the eye from resting at any one point on their surfaces, here the brain scans continually for meaning and never finds it; in fact, the experience of the pictorial space and the search for the joke are wired together in the same circuit. This might be a way of saying Kantarovsky's paintings are not one-liners.

Often, and especially in the earlier work, it seems as though the 'joke' might be about representation itself, and the cartoonish style becomes a vehicle for a kind of parodic meta-discourse on painting. Super-charged signifiers – including paintings, windows, frames, masks and even projectors – appear frequently within Kantarovsky's canvases, as though laying the groundwork for a pun, but one that never actually lands. There's a certain sort of affect that self-referential structures are capable of producing on their own, by creating the illusion that the artwork itself is self-aware and thus able to 'think'. These paintings capitalize on that but with a healthy dose of irony and occasional cuteness. Sometimes paint itself passes over into the realm of signs and ciphers conjured by the cartoons, assuming the role of a character, or becoming a caricature of itself. This is the case in *You Expected Objects* (2013), where a vortex of tar-black brushstrokes materializes in front of another painting-within-a-painting, taking on the role of a viewer in front of the depicted work. Despite





the reverence many artists and critics bear toward self-reflexivity, especially in painting, there's a lightness to these works that arises not only from their arch tone but also their palette, which is dominated by thin blues and greys, as well as their facture: wispy lines that demarcate forms with uncommon economy. If there's a struggle happening anywhere behind these paintings, it might arise less from the process of 'resolving' the picture than from the challenge of preserving its ambivalence.

While the language of cartoon illustration seems to speak loudest in Kantarovsky's earlier works, his most recent yield more fully to a language that's specific to painting. First off, there's a much more expansive range of mark-making showing up on their surfaces, with additive procedures (paint building in intensity through layers, or piling up in thick impastos) dovetailing with subtractive ones (bleaching, scraping, scumbling, abrading). Some pictures are unprimed, meaning the paint simply soaks into the linen, sometimes forming crisp contours, other times bleeding out of

control. They've become more laboured as well as more muscular in terms of their use of colour, the latter's role deepening both in establishing space and as a citational tool. In 'Allergies', an exhibition mounted earlier this year at Casey Kaplan in New York, the paintings adopted a vocabulary mined in large part from European painting around the turn of the last century: artists as disparate as Paul Gauguin, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Henri Matisse, Emil Nolde or early Max Beckmann cast shadows on these pictures, though again their invocation within Kantarovsky's tongue-in-cheek pictorial world borders on caricature.

The caricature stands in contrast to Kantarovsky's characters, who no longer seem to be just passing through, and instead have become more deeply entwined in the images' essential fibre – though they don't always look too content within it. In *Visitor* (2014), a man reclines nude on a couch in a pose that parodies Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), one hand covering

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the crotch, his face turned away, tossing us a smug side-eye. Meanwhile, the picture's construction noticeably evokes Matisse: wide, flat fields of brilliant colour comprised of feathery brushstrokes that either butt up against each other or peter out just before making contact with an adjacent shape. The figure and the interior share a certain visual logic up until the face, which shifts in key to something yellower, its profile coming to a point on a Pinocchio-like nose that has been pulled from yet another visual lexicon. Passages like these, where one language surfaces within the brackets of another, give the paintings a sort of schizophrenic voice that betrays a great deal of sensitivity.

Of course, although it's quite easy to be drawn into the worlds offered up by the paintings, not all of the meaning in Kantarovsky's work happens within the confines of the picture plane. For one thing, there's an ongoing insistence on installation. In the past, Kantarovsky has shunned traditional wall-based hangs and installed his works on panels suspended from the ceiling. In a quietly slapstick move, the panels' bases do not quite touch the floor, allowing the disembodied feet of fellow visitors to be seen from the other side. In an exhibition at the Badischer Kunstverein earlier this year, these 'floating' panels were dressed up to look like enormous men's shirts, with collars and buttons running vertically up and down their fronts, their collective, metonymic evocation of the male body in perfect harmony with the archetypal, genteel characters that tend to populate the artist's paintings. Sculpture, too, plays a role here and there. In Kantarovsky's 2012 exhibition at Marc Foxx Gallery in Los Angeles, for example, shapes and angles excerpted from a large, curling metal sculpture in the middle of the space resurfaced as motifs in the surrounding paintings. Repeatedly, Kantarovsky has sought ways of bringing his extremely two-dimensional painted figures into three-dimensional space, where they're poised for new kinds of

Opening page
When Things Don't Work Out
 2014, oil, watercolour, pastel, oilstick
 on linen, 1.4 × 1 m

1
You Expected Something Different, 2013, ink, watercolour, oil,
 gesso on canvas, 1.4 × 1 m

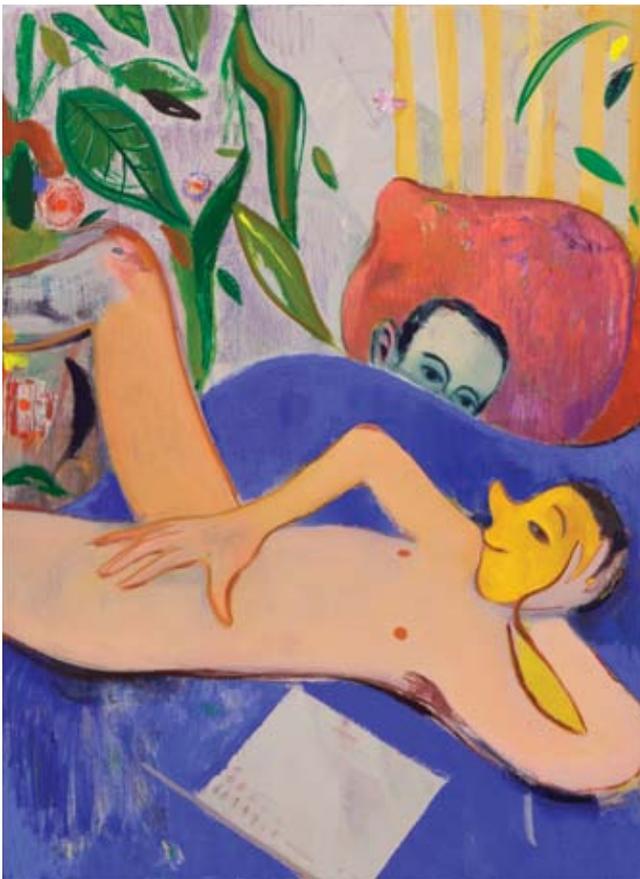
2
 "What Were You
 Expecting, Mr. Milquetoast, a Plot?",
 2014, installation view, Badischer
 Kunstverein, Karlsruhe

3
 Visitor, 2014
 oil, watercolour, pastel, oilstick on
 linen, 1.4 x 1 m

All images courtesy
 Casey Kaplan, New York, Mark Foxx
 Gallery, Los Angeles, and Tanya
 Leighton, Berlin



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collisions with historical genres. In *A Situation* (2012), for instance, a cartoonish man's lower trouser leg and shoe were cut out of steel and mounted low to create the illusion of a figure stepping through the wall, reproducing a motif already established in the paintings of people entering, exiting or passing through the frame. It's hard not to read it as a cover version of Robert Gober's beeswax leg sculptures from the late 1980s, the latter's eerie corporeality exchanged for the surreal experience of an embodied sign. (Performance, it's worth mentioning, has also started to appear in recent collaborations with artists Liz Magic Laser and Ella Kruglyanskaya.)

Kantarovsky's work may be teasing at times, and it carries a lot of heavy subject matter, but there's a sweetness to it that's pretty hard to miss. Some of the figures could have even been taken from children's book illustrations, like the pyjama-clad men in the pair of paintings *Homo Duplex I* and *II* (2013), who slump pensively in the corners of pale-pink and blue squares that block out the centres of two landscapes. One shows an expansive industrial scene, the other a soft forest, both of which register as the content of memories or dreams – just out of reach. Dreams tend to be places of mixed codes, and it might be nice to imagine this work as half-dreaming. Though, actually, Kantarovsky's project is far from sleeping. ♦♦

Scott Roben is an artist and writer based in New York, USA.

Sanya Kantarovsky lives in New York, USA. In 2014, he had solo exhibitions at: 346 Mission, Los Angeles, USA; Casey Kaplan, New York; and kim? Contemporary Art Center, Riga, Latvia. In 2015, he will have solo shows at Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles; Tanya Leighton, Berlin, Germany; and Studio Voltaire, London, UK.