

Paintings and self portraits

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I believe the painter Urban Grünfelder would have chosen this plain title for a text about his art. "To purge" is the first word that comes to my mind in regard to his work, whose development I have been privileged to follow over the past ten years or so; to leave out, to condense, to concentrate - until his canvases bear only what is indispensable to painting: pigment and fiction.

Backgrounds in acrylic paints, figures in masterful oil paints, both often in bright "signal" shades, quite close to the common color properties, but always shifted a few nuances, which account for the unique character and which transform his works into pieces of art - quite an achievement. Maybe the fiction begins with the way he applies the paint. Grünfelder meticulously avoids every gesture, every individual "stroke" with his paint brush; the energy I see in the opaque monochrome shapes the artist takes himself from their surfaces. He conceals from the viewer that which we appreciate about many other paintings from different times and artists, also a desideratum in academic art history. At the same time Grünfelder knows only too well about the object character of every painting and thus the general impossibility of that concealment. In short, he provokes us.

Open secrets - as viewers we could have begun thinking at the word "oil paint". Surprisingly often - to me - the painter uses the word "communication" in context with his work. From this field we know that it is not concrete matter that meets and interacts, but rather wishes, desires, dreams, nightmares, projections, phantasies - in myths, metaphors, symbols. Ecce homo - and maybe this being is the most comprehensive of all our fictions.

In general the paintings depict a person, seldom two, or rather something we could describe as "logo", as signet, symbol, or metaphor of a person whose abstract outline, always faceless, without individual recognizability, mostly genderless. Many of Grünfelders figures could be women; of course not "dulcet", "round", ostensibly senseous, they serve no scheme. Urban Grünfelder says in principle he probably always only depicts himself, ecce homo. The stories, the conditions stick to the canvas as if pressed and shock frozen; motionless shells caught in their poses. Only the viewer is able to move - physically and mentally - and the artist invites us to do so.

Examples: a figure in a shade of darkest blue crouches as if freezing in a cold blue winter morning, she protects her extremities, is physically and psychologically lonely. Or: a grotesk disembodied corpus, protects its head, plugs its ears, does not want to hear any more gruesome news, has enough since the cruxifiction, jerks. It is up to us. How far we want to see and hear the essence of these paintings. How much we allow ourselves to leave our social shells, the masks of society, and are willing to endure the naked sight of the other as well as ourselves.

Another crouching figure in a different painting, helmet head, in an almost military dark grey, with lustful curledup toes he extends himself over the canvas and shoots, as he believes, into the world - and yet he appears to us like a skewered, literally dumn ape, who will not leave his red cage. I do not want to have to decide if I shoot, even without testicles. The duality of our role as the viewer, the sense of being watched while watching, always makes for a shared experience. A rare painting depicting two figures, identical frontal half nudes, grouped together to a triptychon with an empty light blue. Our view cannot find a hold in it. Do they threaten us? Do they want to separate into the emptiness of the adjacent paintings, or maybe more brutally, do they want to duke out or endure something among several, among many? Or are they yet again only an "I", social or psychological conflicts among three, between two, or within one?