

PARIS

Genieve Figgis

ALMINE RECH GALLERY

Genieve Figgis's painted tableaux often seem to present a dramatic event, like an operatic performance, but one whose coordinates can't fully be discerned. The Irish painter's characters, who adopt theatrical poses or stand in groups, as in a conversation piece, are well aware that they are on public display. Judging by their regal costumes—long, wide dressing gowns; tuxedos; gaiters; elaborate headgear—their time is not our own. Moreover, they move about in spaces unlike ours. The paintings provide glimpses of frescoed ceilings, chandeliers with candles, gilded furniture with bouquets of flowers, arches and expansive windows, heavy curtains and carpets, pianos and canopy beds. On the walls hang portraits whose subjects are depicted with the same level of realism as the characters themselves.

Typically created without preparatory drawings and left unframed, the paintings are of modest dimensions, and completed in a single session, wet on wet. The pictorial technique contributes to the overall *mise-en-scène*: pastel tones of pink, light blue, and purple; diluted, watery, transparent acrylic colors; a spendthrift use of paint. Figgis employs multiple references to French Rococo painting, from works by François Boucher to ones by Fragonard, with their rural scenes and *fêtes galantes*. *The Happy Accidents of the Swing (after Fragonard)* (all works 2018), for instance, recaptures the renowned *Les hasards heureux de l'escarpolette* (The Happy Accidents of the Swing), 1767. These are what Figgis calls "cover versions" rather than ironic post-modern pastiches. In other words, they pay homage to French academic painting, but only through a gesture of incorporation, an act of phagocytosis.

In fact, Figgis looks at these illustrious precedents through the distorted lens of a James Ensor. This is why a contrary element marks these apparently frivolous scenes, revealing reality's dark and unexpected implications. Faces are deformed, streaked, or crystallized like agate. Limbs decompose and decay; walls appear to dissolve. Figgis's surfaces are watery and translucent, but her protagonists seem to appear in trembling reflections, as if in the ripples of a pond after someone has tossed a stone.

Thus, Figgis staged a macabre celebration, bringing to mind Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842), a story about a plague striking a castle during an aristocratic ball. In Figgis's version, as in Roger Corman's 1964 film adaptation of Poe's tale, the guests—at this point all infected, all beyond life—continue to party on, even more carefree now that they can take death for granted. Figgis depicts a post-mortem celebration with an irresistibly contagious *jouissance*, a veritable invitation to viewers to become more intimately involved. The title of her recent show in Paris, "Wish you were here," takes on a somewhat macabre overtone, as a sort of salutation from beyond the grave.

With their faces made up in lurid colors that match the gaudy decor, the figures remain indifferent to the putrefaction that is so vivid to their viewers. And they reiterate the appetites and social rituals of the living, from courtship and seduction to coupling. This is the case in *Velvet curtains*, where, when we surprise a couple in the midst of coitus, we become indiscreet voyeurs, our eyes wide like the two large windows with open curtains in the background.



—Riccardo Venturi

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.