

ALMINE RECH

PURPLE

“SALON DE PEINTURE” A PAINTING EXHIBITION
AT ALMINE RECH, NEW YORK

May 10, 2021



Purple is pleased to present “Salon de Peinture,” a painting exhibition revisiting the idea of the classic Salon and featuring over 30 international artists, including Amanda Wall, Alejandro Cardenas, George Rouy, Chloe Wise and more.

On view now through June 5th 2021 at Almine Rech, New York
39 East 78th St

GHOST FIGURATION
by Olivier Zahm

Painting is changing rapidly in the era of the digital revolution, with a particularly spectacular return to figuration. But can we still simply oppose figuration and abstraction? The categories themselves seem too outdated to describe the new hybrid in painting because it evades a single definition, conceptual or formal. It is this variety of hybrid that is metamorphosing current painting practices and which Almine Rech’s “Salon de Peinture” now addresses.

A name for this movement? Ghost Figuration, which I make in reference to Mamoru Oshii’s cyberpunk film, Ghost in the Shell — only now, it’s painting in the web of the electronic matrix.

Let's talk first about speed, novelty, and the figurative explosion. In a few years, and at lightning speed, the young painters in Almine Rech's "Salon de Peinture" have established themselves. They no longer need an art critic's validation or a magazine like Artforum to talk about them, or even the art market and the art establishment. They show their paintings online. Their pictorial originality is self-evident: they reinvent painting freely, often with irony, combining political awareness, decorative élan, aesthetical obsession, and an extreme narcissism that combines sexuality, dreaminess, and pictorial surrealism. That's the reason for this "Salon de Peinture": it reflects this new situation in painting, which is controversial, which annoys but also fascinates.

Ghost Figuration offers direct contact with the mental reality of a generation reacting to the overdose of images that constitutes their reality, for which painting is a dreamy, fun, and political escape, a way to disappear, a ghostly transmutation. It is this radical mutation that "Salon de Peinture" speaks of. It's both post-bad painting and post-Richard Prince — hence, the extreme variety, improvisation, and eclecticism of this new Salon. There's no denying that this kind of painting irritates art-world people who like to talk trends and fads. Here, we launch the debate! In my opinion, this is a paradigm shift in a radical situation, which is only just starting.

It's banal to say that the art world is now changing at an accelerated rate. More surprising is to note the change coming from painting, the medium that art critics never cease to anticipate and precipitate its end. To quote the latest paradoxical, if ironic, effort — the exhibition curated by the artist Peter Fischli at Fondazione Prada (May 22 to November 21, 2021), entitled "Stop Painting." The press release clearly stated the situation: "in an attempt to answer these and other open questions, [Peter Fischli] identified five radical ruptures caused by technological and social changes that marked artistic paradigm shifts through rejection and reinvention of painting" ... "the diffusion of photography" ... "the invention of the readymade and the collage" ... "the 'death of the author'" ... "the critique of painting as a commodity" ... and "the crisis of criticism in the so-called late capitalist society."

The question posed by Fischli's exhibition is the same as that of the "Salon de Peinture" in New York: "if the current digital revolution can also cause a new crisis of painting or, on the contrary, contribute to its renewal." Peter Fischli's exhibition continued to endlessly question the death of painting, as if he still secretly wishes for it. In New York, Almine's "Salon de Peinture" offers proof that painting is indeed caught in the mesh of the digital world and circulates everywhere. Moreover, Ghost Figuration is a new artistic paradigm, and one that addresses the digital revolution, which makes any question about the end of painting totally absurd. But not that of the end of art — because this revival of painting, in this ghostly phase, precisely engages a heroic fight, disillusioned, relentless, already lost but facing a much greater danger: the end of art in a digital world (the vogue for NFT could be the caricature of this situation). Digital reproduction is today's operative modality for the end of art — as self-driving cars are the end of driving. Like the algorithms that influence our choices of books, movies, restaurants, and other elements of our digitally assisted lifestyle, digital reproduction influences our choices to the point of replacing them. There are many examples of how the digital world is a threat to personal freedom. A planet inundated every second with trillions upon trillions of digital pictures is a threat to human art, however you look at it.

The permanent immersion of the self in the flow of digital images is what Guy Debord called the "spectacle" in the age of integrated capitalism — or Pierre Klossowski's subjectivity as "living money" (La Monnaie Vivante). Why is painting a powerful paradigm for subjectivity in this virtual context, when other forms of art (installation, video, photography, readymade, multimedia, etc.) no longer seem as operative as they were from the 1990s to the 2010s? How to explain this turnaround in favor of the Ghost-Figurative genre? How does painting play a new part?

It's not so much that these young painters push the boundaries of the genre or that they seek to redefine the essence of painting. That's not their problem, not at all. It is rather that their subjects and their artistic practices are informed by the artificiality, the facticity, and the ideology of the current digital means of representation. When photography is as much a manipulated world as it is a manipulator of the world itself, painting touches on another form of truth: that of painting in a world of the false and the blurred. And that's interesting: it's a visual voice in the matrix. A new figuration can be composed of all kinds of personal experiences, intimate deviations, deviant or fetich figures, ironic or toxic perspectives, shared solitudes, and intimate politics.

This Ghost Figuration is not the return of painting, which is said to be dead — it is the nature of pictorial images that haunts the global network of images. Ghost images escape the established and controlled visible regime. For Almine Rech's "Salon de Peinture" is held as much in social media as it is on the gallery wall, overriding the art world on all sides. It is not that we talk about painting on Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook, nor that painting creates — as was the case in the 19th century — public scandal or controversy. It is because painting, seen as a digital world exhibition, is freed from the grip of the art market, as well as of criticism, galleries, and institutions. Painting can be exhibited without the idea of painting itself. Painted images can be seen without limit, without concept.

In doing so, they gain in stealth, clandestinity, invisibility in the network, as paintings that escape the regime of signs. It is painting that questions. Which is intriguing. It indicates a possible paradigm shift in digital representation as well.

This new figuration no longer struggles with photography as a mode of representation, but as a form of communication in the social network. Perhaps it is freer and maybe better armed than recent avant-gardes (including the relational aesthetics of the 1990s, heralded by Nicolas Bourriaud, Éric Troncy, myself, and other critics) to propose new models of subjectivity. What is the use of defending a "relational art" when social networks are the operating mode of subjectivity? Of the relationship to the Other? Of the relationship to the great Other — the social body, the love and sex and its collective unconscious on a global, instantaneous scale, suppressing the categories of space and time? The paintings in the "Salon de Peinture" free us from the power and control of the image and extend the conceptual, ironic, phantasmic path that was opened up in the 1990s by painters like John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, George Condo, Albert Oehlen, Martin Kippenberger, to name but a few. Some examples: the sweet hallucinatory pop faces of Brian Calvin; the delicious subversion of Amanda Wall; the gallant scenes and pictorial decomposition of Genieve Figgis; the paintings of Wes Lang, in the forms of epidermal rebus; the ghostly portraits of Alexis McGrigg; the hyper-realistic icons of Sam McKinniss; the soft neo-primitive bodily disfigurement of George Rouy; the fetishism of Jansson Stegner; the traumatic portraits by Claire Tabouret.

This new painting slips into the digital universe, where the very space of the white cube is digitalized, which changes the game. It is an artistic counterpower, a threat to the system of validation and the obsession with likes. The world of social media is one of authoritative sloganeering: "Like me!" "Share me!" "Tag me!" Painting does not play that game. It interrupts this endless circle of everyone being validated by everyone else. It creates silence. A break. A suspension. A fear and magnetism. And maybe a worry. It is, in its very materiality, the vanishing of the image as image. It is an image that escapes the digital dominance of the social image. Within the world of images, this new figuration is the anti-image. A systematic deconstruction of narcissism and individualism. When the artistic alternative (such as the avant-garde of the '90s) is less and less effective, this new Ghost Figuration is a nihilistic alternative to the alternative. The transgression of transgression.

— Olivier Zahm, for Almine Rech "Salon de Peinture"

Photos by Paige Silveria