The Visual Artists’ News Sheet

CRITIQUE SUPPLEMENT

EDITION 33: SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER 2017

Genieve Figgis

‘What We Do in the Shadows’

Almine Rech Gallery, Brussels, 3 June – 29 July

WHEN J.K. Huysmans’s A Rebours (Against Nature) was published in 1884, it was embraced immedi-
ately as epitomising the decadent movement in art and literature. The protagonist of this literary gem is
the Duc des Esseintes, an aristocratic aesthete who withdraws from society into a self-made sanctuary
of aesthetic beauty. Finding daylight unbearably shin-

eal, the jaded, misanthropic Duc lives by night,

staying off crushing ennui by spending all his time
and money on obscure, extreme and perverted pur-

suits. The conspiratorial world of A Rebours came to
way; everything happens by chance. Figgis’s techni-
cal virtuosity was well demonstrated in this exhibi-
tion. Several new paintings were notably larger in
scale than earlier works, making visible greater lev-
els of detail regarding the range of techniques and
methods employed: paint, in thick and juicy hues, is
splashed, poured and dotted across the canvas; gen-
tural swathes of mixing and marbling create bio-
morphic blobs; an array of striking surface textures
evoke Surrealist decalcomania.

Although humour, even frivolity, are consist-
ent features of Figgis’s paintings, there is also a pre-
occupation with the hypocrisy that distinguishes
high society. One can see the tendency to focus on
how the privilege of peace doesn’t prevent one
from being repugnant. It is perhaps this aspect of
Figgis’s work that has resulted in so many viewing it
as a response to colonial Irish history. One of my
first impressions when first encountering Figgis’s
paintings in 2014 was how they represented and
reflected upon particular aspects of Irish history.
Indeed, many have suggested that her paintings elicit a very particular Anglo-Irish atmosphere.
While this is certainly the case, it would be a mis-
take to view these images as referring exclusively
to any one particular socio-cultural context.

The show at Almine Rech certainly resonated
as much with the Belgians as it would with any Irish
audience. In fact, viewing the exhibition in the
Brussels context seemed particularly appropriate,
with several paintings depicting courtly culture and
seeming to summon up episodes from the cheq-
ued history of the Belgian Royal Family. In par-
cular, I was reminded of episodes of the life of King
Leopold II (1835 – 1909) who was known not only
for his lavish palaces and monuments, but also for
establishing a private freedom in the Belgian Congo.
Between 1861 and 1908, Leopold made at least three
million francs from this operation, which was ille-

gally run as a private business, with forced labour
used to extract tons of ivory and rubber. To assist in
the process, the King employed a mercenary mili-
tary police known as Force Publique whose brutali-
ty contributed directly to millions of deaths. In
Belgium, Leopold was also very unpopular, not just
because of these acts of genocide, but because he
was viewed by many as an immoral philanderer.

Just before his death in 1909, he married the 26-year-
old courtesan with whom he had been living
amongst the palm trees in one of his palatial glass-
houses.

Another reason Figgis’s exhibition had such
local resonance was the fact that several works
seemed to echo those of James Ensor (1860 – 1949),
one of Belgium’s most intriguing painters. Figgis
acknowledged the importance of his legacy in her
recent exhibition Ensor and Friends, and it is cer-
tainly much that connects their work. Both artists
have a proclivity for the macabre; their paintings
reveal the influence of Bosch and Breughel,
Pre-

Renaissance artists who prioritised the visceral and
expressive over the idealised. Both Ensor and Figgis
reinterprets art history on a personal level, aligning
classical painting traditions with contemporary
concerns. But what unifies these artists most – and
what made Figgis’s show such a pleasure to view – is
their inimitable ability to produce artworks of
unnerving beauty: seductive and lurid scenes from
any one particular socio-cultural context.

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