ALMINE RECH

Genieve Figgis
The Pursuit of Happiness

Jan 7 — Feb 11, 2023 | Paris

The work of Genieve Figgis is that of a liberation enterprise. It is a question, canvas after canvas, of relieving our imaginations and releasing the beings - or the spectres - who haunt our History. From Madame de Pompadour to Marie-Antoinette, from Count Fersen to Napoleon, she evokes a universe of royalty and power, where a brittle prestige gives way to a voluptuous strangeness, where characters become creatures, inhabitants of a grotesque world. The singular touch of Figgis gives each portrait the appearance of a mask, a disguise, and her work at large amounts to an ethereal study of a carnival cast. The artist offers us distance; the comic and the absurd free us from the weight of a suffocating heritage of representatives and symbols which no one chose. These portraits present surreal beings where garish colours mingle, where gazes are lost, where mouths twist and expressions melt. There is, in each one of them, a form of monstrosity. This strategy of subversion pushes Figgis towards the canons of the Rococo genre, in particular La Bascule by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1750-1752), or Lovers in a Park by Boucher (1758). Many works also show rural and bucolic worlds, places of leisure and scenes of pleasure. The paintings are filled with cherubic angels and signs of love. The Rococo style, which appeared at the beginning of the 18th century, was precisely intended to make people forget reality, the decline of a past glory through light scenes of gaiety, of joie de vivre. The paintings of the period depict pastoral scenes and walks of aristocratic couples, which Figgis echoes, morphs, and dissects here. The multiple portraits of Marie-Antoinette are an homage to this figure and a recognition of her long-lasting influence and presence in history, a place that so many remarkable women are still deprived from. For Figgis, Marie-Antoinette remains an icon, and her paintings try to grasp a character who went through a forced marriage and her search for happiness in the golden jail of Versailles.

Figgis uses the genre of the portrait for its marvellous ability to satirise, but also as a commentary on the history of painting, as well as a mirror of our time. Her work could appear anachronistic; how, and why, in 2022, when the world is being overwhelmed by ecological, political, economic, and military crises, to paint the figureheads of a vanished world, suspended in their privileges, a priori so far removed from reality of our present? Certainly, it is because this fascination for power, privilege, and for their representation, still persists and operates. Certainly it is because the world in which we live is still that of the reign of property, of the inequalities, exclusions and injustices that it generates.

This group of largely historically-themed paintings is wrenched into the present by two works in particular - William and Kate's Wedding and The Crown, a portrayal of Charles and Diana with their young princes, a picture sharing its name with a Netflix series about the life of Queen Elizabeth II. These depictions of Modern Royals throw their historical counterparts from the other side of The Channel into stark relief, raising questions around the way in which the aristocracy was, and is, shaped - the House of Windsor and the Palace of Versailles being both products of communication, and both equally mystified and exclusive.

Our time is characterised by a careful examination of the past, its writing, and its reception. Figgis proposes, through her distortions, a renewed awareness of History and how images shape and sculpt our understanding of the present world. She invites us to dismantle, one canvas after another, this asphyxiating heritage and this deaf violence, to break down their masks, and to reveal their origins. What and who do we believe in? What story do we find ourselves in? In what historical, ethical and political heritage do we recognize ourselves? What figures do we celebrate? One thinks back to the cruel humour of Goya's Black Paintings (1819-1823). In their dreamlike atmosphere, the witches, demons and goblins become metaphors to express the violence, ignorance and false beliefs of a humanity blinded by his own pictures. In one of his most well known etchings, and with words that would very well resonate with Figgis's concerns, Goya wrote: "The sleep of reason produces monsters".

—Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel