ALMINE RECH

Genieve Figgis
Wish you were here

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In 2012, Cecilia Gimenez, an eighty year old woman living in the Spanish town of Borja, near Saragossa, took it upon herself to restore *Ecce Homo*, a nearly one hundred year old degraded fresco representing the Christ in the Sanctuary of Mercy church by the painter Elias Garcia Martinez. Obviously lacking any kind of traditional skills appropriate for the matter at hand, Cecilia Gimenez transformed against her own best judgment the banal christ covered with mold into a summary, laughable character which has been compared, among other things, to an awkwardly drawn monkey. There was an indignant uproar as well as instantaneous success on the internet, which turned the news tidbit into a memorable and remarkable international event that even generated unexpected profits when tourism subsequently developed. Cecilia Gimenez eventually obtained an "author copyright" share of 49% in royalties from the profits generated, and in 2016 the French newspaper *Le Monde* informed its readers that "*the town of 5,000 multiplies its efforts to capitalize on its now-cherished new tourist attraction, with events such as a new Elias Garcia Martinez exhibition or a workshop that lets people paint their own version of Ecce Homo (ruined or not).*"[1]

The Irish artist Genieve Figgis (born in Dublin in 1972) shares hardly anything with Cecilia Gimenez and certainly not the latter's questionable aptitude for painting, a discipline she studied at length at the National College of Art & Design in Dublin. But the characters depicted in Genieve Figgis' scenes share in their very appearance some undeniable similarities with the Iberian Christ, starting with the curious impression one gets when considering the picture in its totality: that everything is there, including the atmosphere and narration, approximate treatment of forms notwithstanding.

In Figgis' work the procedure is similar to a complex alchemy that often makes the pictorial material feel as if it has dribbled then melted like candle wax. Shapes dissolve into each other, blurring body contours or backdrops as surely as they would be in a funhouse mirror. Scenes gain a startling "unreality," forcing themselves on the viewer as so many possible vaporous mirages in the crushing heat of the desert. Is it because of these laughable distortions or because of the sort of stupor betrayed by their summarily painted eyes that viewers find themselves immediately and affectively attached to the characters in Figgis' paintings? They're figured and disfigured at once, as with Ensor's paintings; certainly I am not the first person to notice their resemblance. To the best of my knowledge Figgis has never quoted the Belgian painter, but if she hasn't tackled her predecessor's frescoes yet, she nevertheless willingly delivers her own version of other famous pictures, such as Gainsborough from whom she reprised *Mr. & Mrs. Andrews* (1748-49) in 2015, Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *Les Hasards heureux de l'escarpolette* (1767), or Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), among many others. She speaks of her version of these classic artworks as "cover versions," borrowing the term from Pop music. It couldn't be said any better, as it goes without saying that Genieve Figgis' painting has recorded once and for all how art's destiny is to become entertainment. She understands how to turn this fate into an asset by inventing pictorial strategies inherent to this state of being—a rarity. Roberta Smith has accurately described her "cover versions," which give classics a new sound updated by a touch that lends a groovy air to old tunes, as "nasty entertaining pieces of work."[2]

Genieve Figgis, whose pictorial work evokes 18th century British painting and more specifically "conversation painting"—which met a certain success with its group portraits representing members of the same family or friends gathering, frozen in various and sometimes anecdotal activities such as meals, country outings, or music recitals executed on modest-sized formats—has said that "art history, architecture, and music stand as documents of previous worlds." This genre wasn't strictly a British affair, if we think about *La Conversation*, painted in 1721 by Antoine Watteau, a painter with whom Figgis seemingly shares a taste for staged scenes. There is a strong intention to get back to a period and genre that took entertainment in all its shapes and forms very seriously, and no doubt whatsoever about the ambition to express something of our time by the same token. The costumes worn by her characters indubitably inscribe them in the past, but their occupations seem extraordinarily contemporary. To the kind of art that ofteninflicts itself with "political" obligations and doesn't beat about the bush when doing so, Genieve Figgis' painting offers an idiosyncratic counterpoint that favors metaphors and above all enjoyment. Her paintings offer themselves without reserve to a quasi erotic sort of visual and intellectual consumption—they do not shy away from occasionally representing erotic scenes, for which the flat pictorial matter and the shapes and colors carnally wrapped together are perfectly well-suited. Besides, their unrestrained display of entertainment in all its forms, of situations as insignificant as a family meal or a horse ride, casts the long shadow of Instagram and its stupefying iconography on Figgis' oeuvre.

In a way, it is the internet that turned Cecilia Gimenez's disastrous restoration into a pivotal turning point in the history of contemporary images. The fateful story of how Figgis' work met its own propagation can rival Gimenez's. Figgis posted some images of her paintings on Twitter, followed Richard Prince on that same social media, got followed back, and was notably encouraged later on by the acquisition of a picture. Her work undoubtedly maintains an unabashed relationship with its time, underneath the period costume scenery. Here lies its avowed ambition: to find for today's painting a form and stories that know how to speak to the present without necessarily resorting to its ordinary artifices.

Eric Troncy

Translated from French by Noëllie Roussel

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[1] Emmanuelle Jardonnet, *Le Monde*, August 16, 2016.

[2] Roberta Smith, "Genieve Figgis: Good Morning, Midnight," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2014.

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