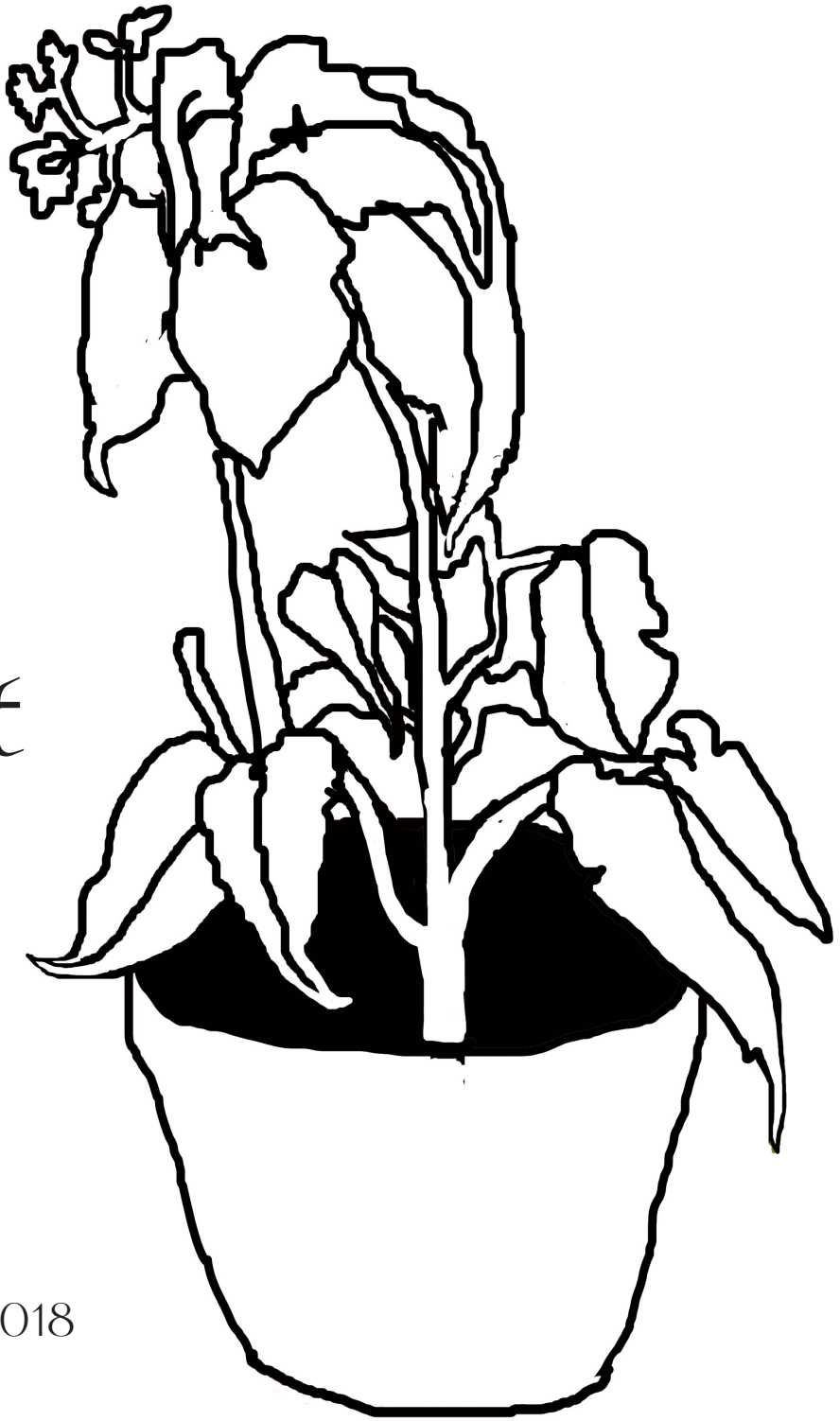
George Rouy

Squeeze Hard Enough it Might Just Pop!



Hannah Barry Gallery
1 February - 17 March 2018

Baited Pleasures: The Precarity of Desire

Charlie Mills

On more than one occasion George Rouy has mentioned to me the reading of his works as erotic. This he says, is not something he ever intended. The works are sensual and evocative, sure, but not erotic. Unfortunately, despite his own interpretations I can't help but be the one to make this connection. There is indeed something sensually erotic about George's paintings – a point in which I'm sure I'm not alone – but there is also a conceptual engagement with the question of eroticism per se: the ordering and codification of our libidinal economy in different socio-political paradigms. To use a term borrowed from the work of queer theorist Paul B. Preciado, the paintings on show at *Squeeze Hard Enough It Might Just Pop!* evaluate how our potentia gaudendi – the virtual capacity of our bodies to be excited, exciting or excited-with – is manifest in our current social milieu.

George frequently cites medieval art as a key source of inspiration in his paintings. The works of Jean Fouquet or Rogier van der Weyden for example. However, as both an aesthetic and conceptual genealogy to this exhibition (of which are there many), I can't help but recall the infamous relationship between several works of two great modern painters: Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) and Matisse's *The Dance II* (1932). There is of course no drought of discourse surrounding these two paintings and their reflection on the status of sex, liberation and desire in early 20th century Europe. This was after all, a period defined by its intense urbanisation, furious imperial disputes and radical political upheaval. The history of modern art is typically seen through this lens, and the concurrent story of eroticism plays a decisive role. For some, eroticism in art had become a powerful weapon; a dagger to the heart of bourgeois taste.

In these paintings, we find a means of critique; an avenue of escape. In *Les Demoiselles*, Picasso uses afro-cubist forms to provoke the viewer, deconstructing ideals of feminine and racialized beauty. The title draws attention to the roles that colonialism, sexual labour and class played in the construction of modern urban life; chastising the fraudulent values that relegated desire to a savage or 'primitive' sensibility. *The Dance* too presents five characters, this time bathed in a vivacious orange warmth, circling a clear hilltop in faunic revelry. Unlike Picasso's confrontational stares the dancers are playfully indifferent. You, the viewer, are irrelevant to their primal cavort. The scene is knowingly utopic: a non-place. Somewhere beyond, out of reach of rational civil society. In each case, a violent rejection of classical Western form has charged their art with an erotic intensity; not only were their subject matters full of sex, but the unleashing of painting from its vapid constraints was a gesture itself full of libidinal menace.

Although there are clear formal semblances between these paintings and George's own oeuvre, it is their differences that really interest me. Whilst they all share the use of a nominal setting, human corporeality and a subtle balance of affect and force, what allures me is how their representation of desire and the erotic has shifted from a modern to contemporary formulation; reading from Deleuze, from an architecture of discipline to the undulations of control. Contrary to those who cite a timeless or spectral quality to George's work, my contention is that his paintings are in fact wholly contemporary, reflecting a new form of desire which – unlike its forbearers of the modern age – does not follow from narratives of order and repression, but rather produces the erotic through a heterogeneous network of soft technologies, audiovisual techniques and insidious forms of affective labour.

It is no coincidence that George's paintings are heavily influenced by social media and Photoshop. Straight away we recognise an affective shift from the surface of *The Dance* to George's *Four Lounging* (2018). Figures no longer glide across the face of the canvas, they recede into the hollow screen of an iPhone. The twilight sky – once conjuring peace, frivolity and freedom – now invokes the cataleptic shock of a corrupted MacBook. Even the blades of grass seem stolen from a Clip Art catalogue; delicate brushstrokes are mistaken for digital airbrush. Where previous bodies were clearly delineated or crested with geometric edges, George's bodies subtly bleed into one another: an arm becomes a hip, a head becomes a head. Their peculiar anatomies and bent postures recall Schiele's raw corporeal forms and their soft composure plays with Moore's organic modernism. However, where these artists looked to a natural or 'real' state for the human condition, George makes no such suggestion. The characters are synthetic, and unapologetically so.

No longer confrontational, the gaze of his androgynous cast is vulnerable and needy; in some cases, they retain a vacant grin: a self-conscious apathy or social ennui. They're teasing us... The pale figure in *Gotcha* (2018) reaches for stimulation but remains gormlessly satisfied in disappointment. The symbolic addition of the conch tantalises us further: an unattainable climax, lost at the end of the tunnel. By including two Geiger-like chaise longues, the erotic potential of his paintings is diffused into the room, like a makeshift Chat Roulette. A cheeky red mask reminds us that everything can be siphoned into a cheap commodity, ready to endlessly circulate the web of artisanal brands. The erotic is no longer a form of critique or escape, rather a form of perennial enticement. A never-ending titillation-machine, producing embodiment as a reserve of psychosomatic sex-capital, ready to be provoked, harnessed and instrumentalised in our every finger tap and mouse click. A pop which never comes.

That's probably where it all started

Riccardo Pillon, George Rouy and Martina Tedeschi

When did you first start painting? Is there anyone who inspired you in your practice?
I've always been creative and enjoyed drawing, I've always had that positive feeling when making things.
I used to come up to London with my dad a lot and he showed me around the different famous galleries and museums of the city. I was about 9 or 10 at that time, and that really inspired me to look at things and got me thinking about painting.
At a similar time my nan gave me an old oil paint set and I think that was the start of it, I was a kid but I have a vivid memory because of the smells.
I remember trying to replicate an old master painting I'd seen in a museum, a Hercules, and it was so hard.
Then I drifted a bit from painting and I went back to drawing, I drew lots. It was only until I was at college that I really started again.
That's probably where it all started.

We would like to know a bit about your studio routine. Is it a free flow or strict repetitive job?
When I was working in London I had a studio out of my house so I commuted every day - which is exhausting in itself - but this action of travelling creates a separation; gives you a breather. Once you arrive at the studio you carry on with your work.
After I then moved into a studio space, I had to learn how switch off and to separate life from work. I wake up, I have a cigarette and a coffee, and I write a list that helps me to organise my day. In the first half of the day I do the less creative elements (like the preparation, the stretching of the canvas etc.); I feel energized. I get my list done by a certain point and then I take a break. After the sun goes down I start to project a lot more and I try things out, that's when the creative flow begins. I normally start a new work in the evening, ready to dry for the morning-after when I see it in the natural light. I can work out how colours shifted in natural light and then follow that list again.
Normally it takes me the whole day to get that creative energy back, it is only when it comes to 6 o'clock in the evening that I get that urge to make something new again.
The creative process follows the light of the sun.
I think being disciplined, it's very important. It's something I had to learn.

So you work on a new painting almost every day?
Sometimes my paintings can be executed in a day.
You can paint quite fast..
There is a difference between the realisation of the composition and the execution of the painting. It takes a lot of energy and time thinking about how things are going to sit, once that's over the execution can be quite fast.
To have the vision of the composition of the final paintings do you do preparatory studies and sketches?
I do a lot of drawing between the paintings. Typically I use Photoshop and the trackpad. I realised one day that it breaks drawing habits, as when you are drawing your mind automatically clicks back to how you would draw an object, and Photoshop disrupts that pattern. It is nice to have that limitation.
The limitation of Photoshop helps you in the creative process..
It is important for me to have rules and restrictions and work within that frame.
It is all about controlling.

Are your works linked together? Do you work in series of paintings?
Yes, definitely.
Individual paintings are more like ideas that lead me to a group of paintings. I am building the narrative as I am going along. I have an intuition of where it is going, I trust that intuition. I may do a series of drawings first, then paint some of them, working on a smaller scale. I never plan a series in its entirety and paint them all, it's more like they bounce off each other. After a big series of works I like to rest my thoughts for a while, but I keep working on smaller individual paintings to keep the energy moving.

Which are your influences in terms of art movements from the past or from the contemporary?
I love looking at old medieval paintings.
There is this lack of reality in them; it is not a 'real' reality they present. For me it's another world, like a dream.
Everything is stylized, this is what I love about it. It has had a huge impact on the way I look at things, the way I process things. I love paintings which have that dominance; there is a certain presence within the composition.
Especially faces, faces draw you in.
Then there are certain abstract paintings that have the same dominance, like Rothko.
I love that feeling that can be provoked through a painting.

Are there any particular things you do to get inspiration? Things you look at, listen to, places where you go, books that you read..?
I listen to a lot of podcasts but I like when my work doesn't get too academic. I visit a lot of shows, go for walks to think a lot. You create an archive of images in your mind, you process everything, letting things come in and then letting them flow out.
Do you keep an archive of all your visual references?
I have a digital archive, not a physical one. My studio is not that type of romantic place where everything is spread around, where there are inspirations everywhere. I keep all my inspirations in my phone; I use Instagram a lot to archive images and for research; I can go on google and everything is already there. I can even get 3D scans of seashells if I need a specific type of seashell different from the one that I've got at home.
So you use social media for your archive and for your research, and Photoshop for your sketches.
It seems your work is heavily affected by the use of contemporary technologies?
Yes, definitely.

The animals which appear in your paintings seem to be appropriated from famous myths (the bull/ the swan), or from the history of art (the horse makes me think of the equestrian statues for example). Traditionally they embody an idea of power and strength but here they seem to be deprived of that attribute...

I have always been interested in reappropriating existing icons to place them in a new context. When I paint animals I try to give them a human quality, something in the eyes, something that humans have got. I put them in almost the same situation, they become the same characters. By doing this they lose some of the powerful qualities that we usually associate with them.

We can now talk a bit about the show.
Let's start with the reason why you chose the title *Squeeze Hard Enough It Might Just Pop!*
There is this ambiguity in it... you don't know where the line is before it becomes something erotic. Previously, many people have said that my work looks erotic, something which I've never seen. I've never looked at it as erotic per se... but yes... there is a seductive and fertile element, so I thought that the title could have a split meaning. There is the action of something you pop, (pop in a grape for example), but it could be also related to your emotions: your head 'pops', you think too much and your head explodes.
There is a sensual element within the title and a mental/emotional element in it too.
There is this ambiguity.
Your figures too, they are often squeezed inside the margins of the canvas?
Some of them are squeezed within the margins of the canvas and there are also figures in the action of squeezing itself. There is this one, for example, that is squeezing his glands, which I think is a horrible feeling. To squeeze could be quite a violent action.

So you were talking about actions and emotions. Is the feeling that you want to express more important than a story?
It is a bit of both. There is a feeling that is quite important (the red colour of the figures is more a projection of a feeling), but there is also a subtle narrative that is there... the way hands are placed, the way mouths are opened. These subtleties give that extra little bit of context.

This new body of work comes after another important solo show that you had in 2017. Was there an evolution in the style of the figures?
I think this body of work is a progression of what I did for the previous exhibition, it is a progression within the figures themselves, a natural progression. It happened without trying to push it too much.
There is a human element to it now, whereas before they were more vacant.
There is an evolution in the gestures.
You can see this one holding his neck, the other holding on to the ribs and their finger placed within the seashell.

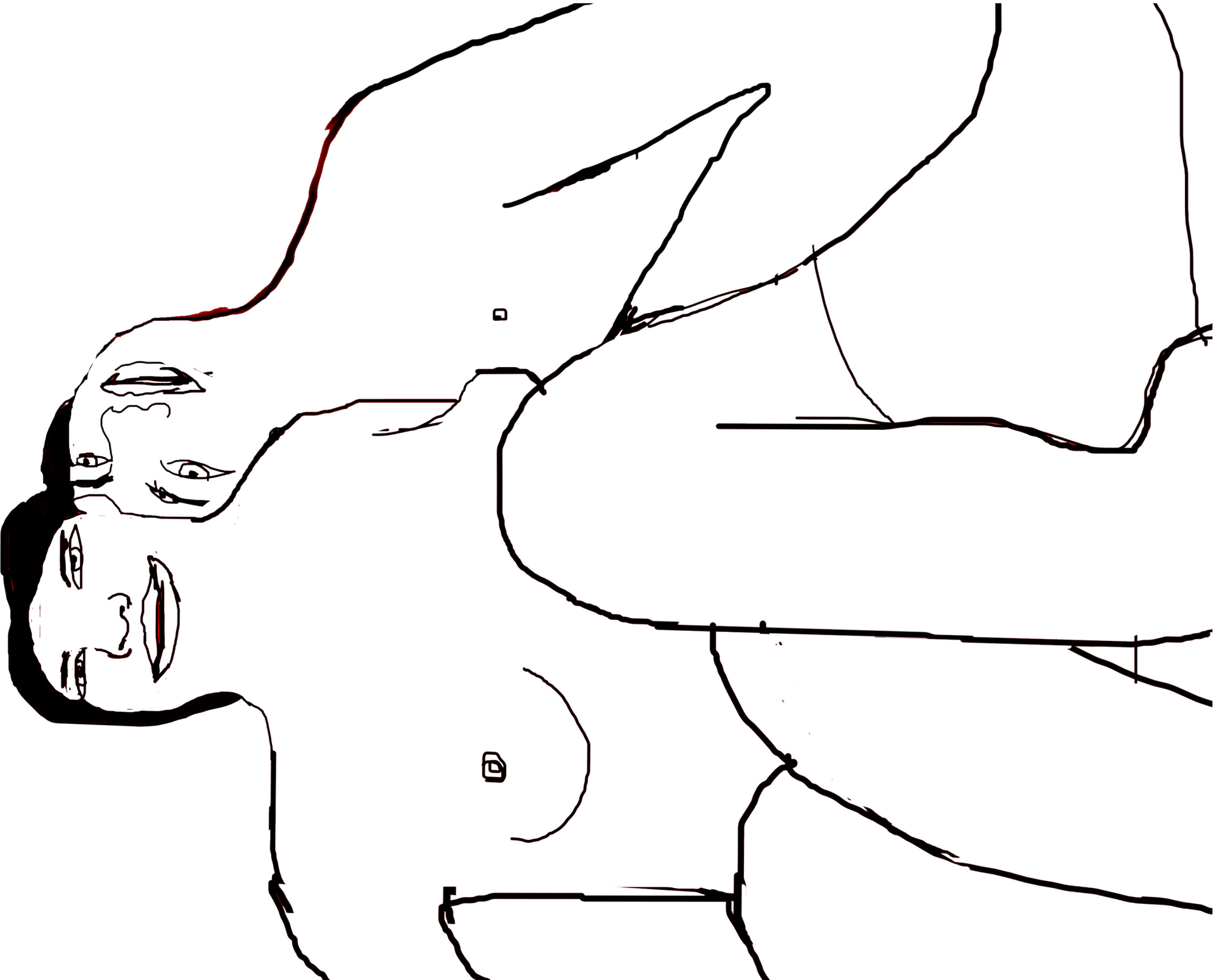
Seashells recur in a lot of your paintings.
Before you said that the work can embody some sensual component. Is it something that can be contained within the seashell?
For me what is interesting about seashells is that they have this deep space: they are homes for animals, fish, crabs etc. There is this curiosity with seashells. If you try to put your finger inside you can't never quite reach the end, you can't ever see what's at its finish.
There is a desire to reach something.
There is this mystery that makes it a desirable object, and this is, for me, a sensual experience.

As we were talking about an evolution within your style, we also noticed that your figures look less contorted now, less painful positions than before?
Despite the darkness that still permeates the paint, these paintings are more positive compared to the others.
The figures were skinnier before, now they look more solid and they add a little smile.
It is all subconscious, it shifted through my situation. I try to just let that happen.
So are there any aspects of your painting that can be defined as autobiographical? Does inspiration come from your personal life?
Yes, subconsciously. Not in a direct way.

In some of your previous groups of paintings the figures were placed in a natural scenario. These figures lost that context, most are floating in a 'non space', with just a few sitting on a patch of grass.
I don't think they jumped too far from my previous series of works, because the natural world painted in previous works is almost like the reflection of a feeling anyway, it's not a direct reference to a certain location.
Some of the dancers and fighters painted in previous works where already floating within non spaces. The space around the figures is flat and does not have any depth. It is in 2D, it's not another dimension. It's almost attached to the main figure, more like a curtain or a screen, something flat there.
I see them at the same level.
As for the colours, I don't know why the recurrence of blues. I've tried other colours but I always go back to the same palette.

How do you title your works?
When I give a title I don't want to over-determine their interpretation. I don't want to add too much to the painting.
It can be hard to discern a gender or ethnicity in your figures, is this a reflection on present days?
Yes, as an artist working in 2018 I am aware that identity is a delicate topic right now in our society. In my paintings sometimes it is more explicit sometimes it is more vague, in this case the viewer I think can place them.

What is coming next? Would you like to try different media?
I would like to explore a smaller size of canvas, very thick. I'd like to cover another type of territory that my other paintings couldn't reach, something closer to a human level. There are other media I'd like to try, I love sculpture and I love ceramic, but I also think that you have to use the language that is most accessible to you at the time.
For this exhibition I made a mask, I wanted to take my characters out of the canvas to put them in to a physical form.
In this show you collaborated with Jesse Pollock to make a pair of benches for the space, and Jacob Wise designed the poster and created the font for you...
Yes, these are things I always wanted to do. You are often restricted to what is accessible in the moment, and I think that shows can be opportunities to try other things out!



A Gesture

Caroline Levy-Mazella di Bosco

With this new series of works, George Rouy continues his exploration of the bodily gesture, this time with particular attention dedicated to hands and the placement of hands. The use of a daring and vivid palette alongside with his creatures' enhanced physicality, bulkier and oversized, are testament to the artist's increasing confidence in his practice and the narrative he wants to express. Red, flashy flamingo flesh contrasts with a seemingly unconcerned sky blue or sometimes a deep dark blue background, and acts as an emphatic statement of the artist's interest in the body. 'I am interested in the body and how the body can express various emotions.' Love: a body is interlaced with another one; anxiety: fingers are spread around the neck, perhaps doubting the strength of, or anxiously checking a fast pulse?; and pain: a bleeding thumb and a distorted torso suffice to remind us of the suffering Christ.

Gesture means the expression of a thought or feeling indicated by the movement of hands, arms or the whole body: physical movement as a language through which the posture or mode of action renders visible hidden emotion: 'These movements of the soul made known by the movements of the body', as Renaissance artist Alberti formulated it. Didn't language begin as a gesture?

Although distinct within their sturdy allure and flattened facial features, George's figures repeat and resemble each other. They are mostly defined by gesture. Any distinctive elements or details that would anchor or set them within the context of a space-time are nonexistent. One cannot deny that their look is arresting, if not uncanny. Even their nature is unclear: are they *fully* human or animal creatures, or an echo of them? A swan is twisting its head into an improbable or surreal posture, limbs are disproportioned, head flattened as if they were compressed to squeeze into the canvas. Are they real, or just pure form? The boundaries between gender and species is also blurred: a body curled up like a swan and a swan's wing mimic human fingers, an ambiguity which is further reinforced if one considers that a swan can be both male and female. Gender confusion and questions of hybridity are contemporary conversations and this element certainly contributes to grounding George's works in present. But these are just creatures. Unclad, they are free from any cultural, even burdensome references which the clothing would have provided; they are 'floating' in the space-time tunnel Sometimes they look like hybrid creatures coming out of an internet screen, a virtual collage of forms moving slowly and rigidly, stuck in the same stiff facial expression. Sometimes they remind us of the 'je-ne-sais-quoi' of Gauguin's exotic paintings, or simply betray Rouy's admiration for Picasso.

The form, however, does not prevail over the content. On the contrary, George over-exaggerates the form to both stress the narrative and capture the viewer's attention. 'Using an illustrative style keeps the narrative very clear and readable for the viewer, as the line forms simply denote the subject they are depicting', George explains. It is a kind of *gesture* toward the viewer. Repeating the form has the same virtue of dragging the viewer into the work and its world. As such, George's works demonstrate that *gesture* also means the technique, the colour, the form, the brushstroke; altogether forming the artist's invitation to the viewer.

Boxed up within the space of the canvas, the figures' exclusive realm is the paint. Besides the green spiky grass in one of the picture and the presence of a shell in several of them, the landscape has otherwise disappeared. Perhaps it could surface within the viewer's imagination, formed by the uninterrupted succession of bodily curves and soft hollows that evoke a hilly or wavy landscape. On the canvas, however, the surface is flat: George has purposefully erased or smoothed out any trace of his meticulously applied brushstrokes to prevent the beholder from wandering into the paint, from being distracted by perspective —perhaps this is a discreet *clin d'oeil* to medieval painting, which the artist admires. Again, the artist gives the narrative prominence.

George has dedicated great attention to hand gesture, as if they were concentrated with all the emotion and meaningful value. First let's stress that sign language is 'hands language'. In the history of representation, the hands bridge the fictional world and reality, they *tell* a story to the observer. And hands are a particularly important element of the narrative in religious iconography. For example, the gesture of the pointed index finger: the finger that shows, guides the beholder through the scene and delivers a message. In Leonardo's *Saint John the Baptist* the saint announces the arrival of the Christ by pointing the index to the sky.

Between the fifteenth and the seventeenth century the introduction of gestural expression brought life and individual character to portraiture, which until this point was a very rigid pictorial genre. Gesture was extremely socially codified, often related to education matter. Furthermore, since antiquity gesture has had a strong correlation with rhetoric: the sign was conceived to support the orator's speech, and was relayed by facial expressions, something that George's characters are interestingly deprived of. Are they impassive or emotionless? Their bodily motion does not connect with the face, which does not express or mimic what their body seems to *tell*. Do they *feel* what they show? They have eyes, but these are devoid of expression: the sign of a certain nihilism, according to the artist. In a sense, the onus is on the viewer who would have to *imagine* the feeling triggered by the action depicted. One character's mouth is obstructed by a shell, impeding speech entirely. The recurring motif of the shell, although often associated with love and rebirth, also refers to the Vanitas painting tradition, which symbolizes the precarity of life. Here, the shell is the remains of the once living body. George's creatures seem to be compared to this shell, mysterious forms which one could physically grasp but whose content is elusive or even vacant. The metaphor posits the discrepancy between reality and illusion — is it really the ocean that one can hear when one brings the shell to the ear?

George Rouy claims that his practice is very intuitive. Yet intuitiveness comes from what is absorbed from one's contemporary environment. Gesture is a living heritage, but it is also codified according to a time and a culture; it is highly symbolic, just as George's practice and use of gesture are. It implies a tacit shared assumption between the emitter and the recipient on the *meaning* of the gesture. Perhaps what these characters may reveal of their time, in their gesture and absence of facial expression, is their ability to show, to point out, loudly, their emotion through a gesture, and yet their inability to *articulate* sensitively or reasonably their emotion.

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