

The Highlights - Wilhelm Sasnal at Anton Kern

Wilhelm Sasnal, *Under the Canvas*

I left Wilhelm Sasnal's show at Anton Kern feeling the sort of confusion one experiences upon entering a television store. The paintings cast a light similar to a panorama of differently-sized models, a display in which subject matter is relegated to the status of the carpet. This confusion, however, was mixed with an appreciation for the tastefulness of the work.

The show consists of nine paintings and two works on paper resembling film or propaganda posters. In the back room is a 16mm film projected on the gallery wall. A press release for the show explains that the works are "held together by the theme of intoxication." In my own experience, the effects of alcohol range from all the way from depression to racing heart, phone calls and text messages to exes, increased sociability and libido, egotism and nausea. To say that I felt none of these things when looking at Sasnal's paintings is not to address the failure of painting to generate a bodily response. Nor is it to point out the failure of Sasnal to deliver said effects. It is rather to bring into question the relevance of subject matter and consistency at a moment when the traditional expectations surrounding these topics are no longer fixed. Sasnal's approach is predictable. He collects the pieces from figuration's recently explosive success and recombines them with modernist abstraction. Ultimately, the works read as a late-in-the-game critique on subjectivity. As a more general trend, Sasnal's work points to a tendency among younger artists (Sasnal is 34) toward making paintings that negate the possibility of genuine emotional response, an attitude inherited from growing up with the internet as the primary means of knowledge acquisition.

Wilhelm Sasnal, *Photophobia*

Pointedly, one of Sasnal's paintings is titled *Photophobia*. It is a brushy abstraction in pale tones reminiscent of a late Monet. The title implies some sort of lens flare, or possibly, the obscuring effect of an over-abundance of light. *Photophobia* could also be understood as visual static - an image pileup so dense it inspires the sort of fear tantamount to great heights, enclosed spaces, huge crowds, or spiders. This indeterminate painting interested me the most. Like the other paintings in the show, I saw it as a loosely understood sampling of earlier models. The difference with *Photophobia* is that the time period is off. While the other paintings combine the already-accepted ambiguous rhetoric of post-wall German

politics (Luc Tuymans, Neo Rauch) with the pervasive attitude of contemporary of photo-based figuration (again Tuymans, Richter, or Sigmar Polke), *Photophobia* tries for something different. Whether ironic or not, the painting hints at a different approach to painting, something bordering on the philosophical or religious. Sasnal is a figurative painter. Whether he would admit to it or not, his interest lies in humanity. Still, he avoids the humanist stance. Even this one painting in the show, which was actually a very handsome abstraction, could be read as a too-bright light, one which blurs the proficiency of the eyes when approaching specificity, a deflected dialogue surrounding the figure.

Wilhelm Sasnal, *Untitled*

Do painters necessarily need to address a subject? Should they in fact know what their work is about? Does not knowing make the work more interesting? If so, is it more interesting for the author or the viewer? Does the viewer any longer play a role in an understanding of the work? Can the artist dictate this understanding? Does Sasnal care about dictating this understanding? Are artists in general thinking they are becoming more or less capable of directing meaning?

Will artists such as Wilhelm Sasnal continue to inhabit the cultural homepage? There is a danger in choice, in making decisions and sticking to them, or perhaps more accurately, a fear. I can relate to this in my own work. In the game of making friends with a global economy, saying anything is treacherous. Forget being political. Sasnal's attitude is: there's a little something for everyone. Some artists, such as Keith Tyson, take this on a subject, directly addressing the proliferation of styles and their marketability as a way to talk about where we're headed. With Tyson, intentionality locates itself within the work, as the sculptures and paintings take on issues such as global marketing campaigns, product design, and digital interpersonal relationships. With Sasnal, I see planned indecision, and hence, obsolescence. As Luc Tuymans puts it, "Painting is a way of thinking and constitutes an enormous archetypal pattern which artists constantly fall back upon." I agree with Tuymans' take on our particular cultural moment, and find this to be the most extant liability in Sasnal's latest show.