

Johan CRETEN

Artforum,

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curators, critics, collectors, and general visitors—as collaborators with these undead images. Complicit with the endless ironies of art as a commodity that somehow provides a portal onto a glimpse of a radically transformed social reality, it intimates that we might be enjoying our endless alienation. In conjuring this vision, Russell extends Asher's institutional critique to a bizarre level of horror and empathy.

But as the *Diamond compositions* might have suggested, *The Floor* relates not only to Conceptual art but to painting, which Russell has worked with extensively before, especially as part of the '90s British collective BANK. The work carries more than a hint of the arch-critic, but also of occultism, Victorian aestheticism, and the death cult that was the Pre-Raphaelite movement, as well as of the reclamation of the floor as a site for painting in Lynda Benglis's work of the late '60s and '70s, or Polly Apfelbaum's since the '90s. What is essential, perhaps, is that the contradictory nature of Russell's work shows a culturally specific intelligence in drawing on identifiably British modes of relation to class, humor, eccentricity, and the absurd. Drawing, moreover, on eccentric philosophies inspired by Gilles Deleuze, such as that of Reza Negarestani, "Foyer" used a form of expanded painting to offer a transformative rereading of institutional critique and of the symbolic and material economies underlying our current art worlds.

—Andrew Hunt

Michael Simpson

MODERN ART

Given all the conflicts in the world today, the need for Michael Simpson's cool, even impassive, though foreboding paintings seems all the more urgent. The octogenarian British artist's most recent show featured eight paintings, most of which depict large blocklike objects. Yet, despite their spareness, the works walk a narrow path along painting's many dichotomies: abstraction and representation, language and image, subtlety and graphic impact.

The first painting in the show, and the only small one, announced Simpson's themes, both intellectual and visual: *Dead Cross 1*, 2020, a diptych, with the words of the title written in Russian on the top panel, and a horizontal, yellowish, isometric cross depicted against a gray background on the lower one. Simpson is not just an avowed atheist, but one whose impetus over the years has been to condemn religion, or at least its authority. Over the decades, he has developed an iconography whose salient motifs include confession booths and leper squints—apertures made in church walls allowing services to be seen by people forbidden contact with the rest of the congregation—as well as ladders and benches. The bench, for Simpson, stands in for Giordano Bruno, the Renaissance philosopher and cosmologist who was tortured and burned alive for heresy in 1600. The long rectangular shape of *Bench Painting 79*, 2022–23, for instance, seems more like a floating coffin than a place of repose. The underlying red, orange, and black paint, mostly covered by a thick layer of white, suggests an atmosphere of smoke and flames. This sense of a heated atmosphere partly covered over is to be found in most of these paintings, as if something lively had been smothered. The heavy white, gray, or cream shrouding these backgrounds also recalls institutional paint jobs.

While the central form of *Bench Painting 79* is perhaps intended to convey a sense of pathos, Simpson's large shapes usually emanate a bold, solid opacity that feels threatening. Flanked by the silhouettes of two office chairs, the squarish notched rectangle composed of brownish vertical bands in *Confessional No.21*, 2023, takes up the bulk of this nearly ten-foot-wide work. Although the central motif is an abstract form, the chairs suggest we should see it as a representation. As with the *Bench* painting, it is the title that explains the object's function. It



Michael Simpson,
Confessional No.21,
 2023, oil on canvas,
 90½ × 118¼".

could be a jail, a guardhouse—one might even think of Peter Halley's cells—or even, with its rust-orange and gray patina, a block of old iron. In two other depictions of confessionals, the central motif resembles a letter D rendered with long slabs of rough white paint that has been then gently rolled over with black, creating a sequence of gray bands such as one might see in a piece of Brutalist architecture—a style whose very name has authoritarian overtones.

These large paintings are confrontational, or, better yet, I should say, they confront us. There are no acts of violence, no imprisonments, no tortures to be seen, but the works' spareness of representation, almost to the point of abstraction, somehow suggests a world void of humanity, as if its protagonists had been reduced to mere furniture. This is where Simpson's art lies: in his ability to create a sense of foreboding without representing it. The paintings are eerily dehumanized, and that, perhaps, is Simpson's point about organized religion or any institutional bureaucracy: We are forgotten.

—Sherman Sam

PARIS

Johan Creten

PERROTIN

Influencers are the new dead hares. At least that is what's implied by the title of Johan Creten's recent exhibition, "How to Explain the Sculptures to an Influencer?" Invoking Joseph Beuys's 1965 performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, Creten's presentation of uncharacteristically small sculptures challenged gallerygoers to think and engage rather than (or at least before) snapping a photo to post on social media. Musing on the role of the artist as much as that of the viewer, Creten presented a group of new bronze and ceramic sculptures in the company of his own student works: a clay sculpture, *La langue* (The Tongue/The Language), 1986, and photographs of related performances in (and underneath) the streets of Paris in the 1980s.

In the gallery's main space, nine tabletop-size green patinated bronzes—posed on individual glazed ceramic slabs in bright shades of red, yellow, and green—were displayed on a low wooden platform. Laid out across this stagelike plinth in the center of the room, the installation



View of "Johan Creten: How to Explain the Sculptures to an Influencer?" 2024. Photo: Tanguy Beurdeley.

of mysterious characters—a female figure cradling a fish in her arms (*The Herring*, 2022–23), a seahorse with its tail wrapped around a cross (*The Seahorse - Library version*, 2023), a prostrate fly with its legs in the air (*The Dead Fly - Library version*, 2023)—suggested a spread of three-dimensional tarot cards. To encourage viewers to linger and contemplate what fortune might be read here, Creten placed several stool-like sculptures from his "Point d'Observation" series, 2018–22, made of bronze or glazed stoneware, on each side of the platform. In addition to implying some ritualistic or theatrical performance, the mise-en-scène acted as a foil for the virtual platforms that photographs of these artworks will inevitably come to inhabit.

On view in a side room was *La langue*, a twisted clay tongue coated in brown engobe (a viscous mixture of clay and colorant that creates a rustic finish). Similar in size to Creten's recent sculptures, it is aesthetically and conceptually quite different. Earthy and semiabstract, the serpentine protuberance was presented on a custom wall mount like a paleontological curio. *La langue* was first exhibited at Galerie Meyer, a Left Bank gallery specializing in tribal art, while Creten was still a student at the Beaux-Arts de Paris. At night, while the exhibition was closed, the young artist would take his sculpture on walks across the city, nestled in his arms like a baby. Small color and black-and-white photographs documenting these nocturnal outings showed Creten cradling the piece in the Réaumur-Sébastopol metro station and on the streets of Pigalle, near the Moulin Rouge. If these vestiges of the artist's own Beuysian happenings hark back to art documentation as it was practiced in the predigital age, they also argue for a more introspective interpretation of the show's title. In addition to provoking a cheeky art-historical critique of how we understand (or don't) contemporary art, Creten's association of his latest and oldest works suggests some deep soul-searching into his own role and responsibility as an artist who makes and shows art IRL. Like Beuys's performance, Creten's exhibition may have been silent, but it asked a lot of questions.

—Mara Hoberman

ROME

Boris Mikhailov

PALAZZO ESPOSIZIONI ROMA

Over a few weeks in a time of war in both Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, an image of a young man dressed in a Soviet uniform embroidered with Ukrainian motifs traveled around Rome. His somber visage appeared everywhere, on buses and billboards, as well as the Beaux Arts facade of the city's Palace of Exhibitions (Palaexpo). The venue's president, Marco Delogu, is a photographer himself and a long-time friend of Boris Mikhailov, the photograph's author and subject. Delogu paired a major retrospective of Mikhailov with an exhibition of Mikhailov's near contemporary, British photojournalist Don McCullin, in a double billing that demonstrated how photography can be utilized curatorially to make politically trenchant commentary. Mikhailov's hand-tinted *National Hero*, 1991, is an overt eulogy to a youth conscripted to war and a commemoration of the Ukrainian homeland. That it posed a challenge to a local hero, Luigi Ontani, the Rome-based performance artist whose likewise hand-tinted self-portraits have inspired artists including Cindy Sherman, may not have been inadvertent. Mikhailov's searing worldview and insight into Mother Russia earned him expository representation with national inflection by a Roman institution that is distinguishing itself with transnational cooperation and geopolitical engagement, effected with full municipal support. Mikhailov is no stranger to Rome, and a vitrine filled with photos of his everyday doings in the historic capital, taken some twenty years ago, closed a retrospective paying homage to one of the great cartographers of our time.

As we know from the many publications on his work, Mikhailov was born in Kharkiv, Ukraine, in 1938, to engineer parents; his Jewish Ukrainian mother had a family background in theater. The extreme hardship and injustices of his wartime youth forged a creative mind capable of bearing witness to bellicose repetitions of history. The exhibition in Rome, "Ukrainian Diary"—organized in collaboration with the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris and curated by that institution's curator, Laurie Hurwitz, in collaboration with the artist and his wife, Vita Mikhailov—chronicled decades of engagement with social justice.

But is art in and of itself moral? From his first visual experiments in the late 1960s—in synchronicity with figures such as Ontani, John

Boris Mikhailov, *untitled*, ca. 1968–75. C-print, 7 1/4 x 11 1/4". From the series "Red," 1968–75.

