

Alan Turner

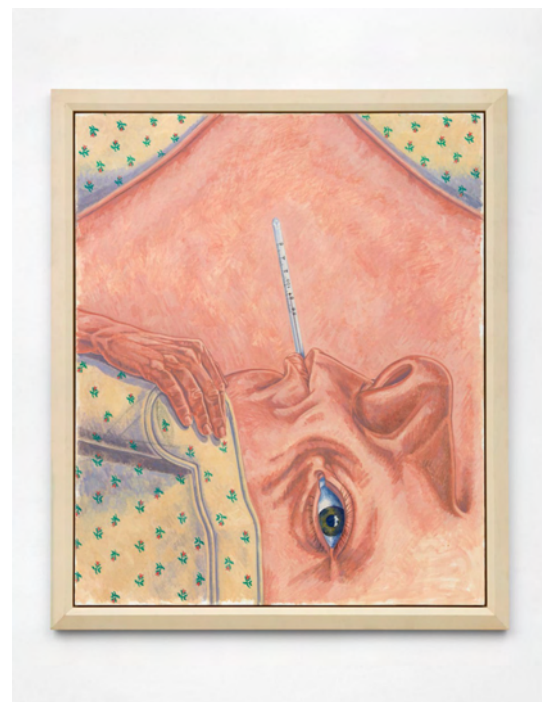
I wanted to make things that were ordinary extraordinary

8 Bury Street SW1Y

04 September – 23 October 2021

In September, Sadie Coles HQ presents an exhibition of paintings by the American artist Alan Turner (1943-2020). Turner first achieved recognition in the late 1970s, having spent four years in London between 1968 and 1972; he went on to pursue an idiosyncratic path for half a century, creating work that was consistently “at the edge, if not out of bounds” in relation to figurative art.¹ The exhibition features eight paintings dating from a fertile phase in his career – the years 1986-1990 – during which he focused on the body as a doubly recognisable and reconfigurable entity. In these works, a fascination for fleshly naturalism combines with an affinity for the illogical, the awry and the aberrant.

Turner once referred to his art as “a form of realism”, influenced by Surrealism and yet concerned with material truth and the nature of looking. In his paintings of the 1980s and early ‘90s, close-up views of body parts – eyes, noses, lips, limbs – splice and hybridise. *Basin Bath* (1989) appears to show a seated female figure in profile; and yet the presence of an eye and lips in the midst of the body unsettles this reading. Scale and anatomy are displaced: the swelling abdomen could as easily be a nose or an elbow. The body parts seem to be jumbled together in a basin, like statuesque discards.



A powerful tension between the part and the whole – the identifiable detail and the ambiguous composite – runs through Turner’s paintings of this period. Cast in a subdued range of flesh tones, and compressed within claustrophobic confines, the human body metamorphoses in ways that are simultaneously exhilarating and unnerving. As the critic John Russell observed of the paintings in Turner’s first show in New York in 1975: “Sometimes they are very funny; but our laughter seems to die in the air, and a shiver takes its place.” In *Under the Table* (1986), an upturned face – glimpsed through the arched vault of a table leg – terminates in two kicking legs. The contracted space and lurid metamorphosis carry echoes of medieval depictions of hell (Turner identified the predella panels of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as early influences), and yet – as in many of his paintings – the vision materialises in uncannily deadpan terms. The upside-down eyes are affectless and unfocused, while the title suggests a domestic tussle or childish game.

Often, Turner’s titles reflect a long-standing love of puns and wordplay. *Barette* (1989) portrays an arm furled inside a long braid of hair, beneath a larger-scale view of a crop of hair (either a crotch or an armpit). The title, referring to a variety of hairclip, perhaps carries an echo of ‘garotte’ – just as the looping braid resembles a noose. Turner’s verbal slippages mirror the ways in which anatomic details are teased apart and rearranged to produce a frisson of strangeness or latent violence. This sense, he once suggested, can adhere to the most casual of perceptions: “I had a collector who bought a painting. He woke up in the middle of the night with only a view of his wife’s armpit. After that, he said he understood my work.”

Alan Lee Turner was born in 1943 into a Jewish family in the Bronx, New York. He studied at the City College of New York, where at the age of twenty, he switched from mathematics to art. From 1965-7 Turner undertook a master’s degree at the University of California Berkeley, before returning to New York to teach at the School of Visual Arts. Between 1968 and 1972, in order to avoid the draft, he lived in London – initially staying with David Hockney, whom he had met at Berkeley. He had his first one-man exhibition at Galerie Neuendorf in Cologne, Germany, in 1971. Following his return to the US, he staged his first New York show at the Carl Solway Gallery in 1975. Over subsequent decades, he exhibited at galleries throughout the USA and Europe. His work is held in collections including those of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Denver Art Museum, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and the Museum of Fine Art, Boston.

¹ Carroll Dunham, ‘Alan Turner by Carrol Dunham’, *BOMB* #73, 01 October 2000

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