

Elsa Rouy & Emil Urbanek
EIGEN + ART Lab
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With Elsa Rouy and Emil Urbanek, EIGEN + ART Lab brings together two young and exciting positions for a joint exhibition. Both Rouy's and Urbanek's works raise matters no less than being, finding identity, and the human body; they both deliberately evoke contradictory, curious and palpable emotions, albeit in quite different ways.

Elsa Rouy's paintings suck the viewer in, plunging them into places dark and sensual. Her bold figures bare their and our burden with bravery while Rouy reclaims the grotesque in a novel and queer way. The graphic display of obscenities and the raw aesthetic of the bodies reclaim the sanctioned and supposed excessiveness of deviant sexualities. But the exploration does not stop there; the paintings seem to probe the threshold of spectacle in which the carnal bodies are invariably on. They engage our attention first through provocation, but we stay with them as they literally embody the wounds and conflicts of each of us.

In a way, the physicality of human bodies in their rawness always hovers on a thin edge of all-encompassing beauty and repulsing brutality. Rouy's paintings do not shy away from that raw emotion, which is erotic and investigative. They venture beyond basic assumptions of the ugly and the beautiful, exposing political and art-historical prejudices. Rouy's approach to painting seems to subtly build up the layers into a surface that is at once raw and soft. The bodies feel extremely real and doll-like, evoking the grotesque body as the faces become masks and skin costumes that might allow willing viewers to join the carnival.

Emil Urbanek's paintings carry a distinct presence. Their subtle boldness is at once ephemeral and substantial. They tend to feature muted colours with both sharp and blurred lines, adding a hint of nostalgia and transience. However, beyond their instant appeal, they have depth in the way they fill the canvas and the room, which is a recurring feature of Urbanek's formal language. The apparently serene paintings throw contradictions at the viewer, keeping the work exciting and humming. The ambiguity is deliberate and an inherent part of Urbanek's exploration of gender and identity, as tangible as the movement the graphite traces suggest.

There is something elusive about Urbanek's figures; the strange yet familiar figures and forms are archaic, universal and contemporary. As they push their boundaries to fill the compositions, even the surrounding space is alive with hints of forms, shapes and shadows. These compositions and some of these shadowy figures are so subtle that it might take a moment to recognise them, which adds to the quality of these canvases: they invite the viewer in, in a personal but sure way with deliberate use of

colour, brush strokes and depth. They demand time and attention in a way only painting can do in the right hands.

Both these artists relate to tradition in their own way, evoking possible paths they might be taking, establishing their work as ones to watch. In a compelling twist, these two different positions show proximity in their provocative fragility and the solidity they find in working with and through it in painting.

There is no doubt that the new era of figurative painting is upon us—it is alive and open as never before, and the exhibition Elsa Rouy & Emil Urbanek at EIGEN + ART Lab gives viewers an idea of what is at stake.