

Justin de Verteuil

Nexus

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Linkage, entanglement, connection, interrelation

Somewhere over the rainbow way up high

Painting as a medium to interact with the world, transposed into the intimacy of the studio: Justin de Verteuil allows interpersonal relationships to feed in as a creative force to convey moods and translate and develop them into his figurative pictorial worlds. Photographically recorded moments from travels and the mundane serve as a template; inner conflicts and longings structure the space. In addition to self-portraits (*Tit for Tat*, 2023), individuals from the artist's family and personal environment are depicted in group situations (*7th Heaven*; *Tölke Eck*, both 2023) or as loners (*Thibaut*, 2023). They tell of the now, a time characterised by pandemic, alienation, isolation, and a collective restlessness. The canvas becomes a plane of projection for these impressions, characterised by the tension between proximity and distance, between presence and absence, condensed into the components of figure and space.

We—all of us on Terra—live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times. The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response. [...] The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places.

– Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2016, Durham, NC, p.1

The impression of closeness and connection in de Verteuil's compositions is deceptive: the touches and interactions seem distant, out of place, and inconsistent with the protagonists' postures and facial expressions. There is hardly a moment of eye contact between the protagonists. Each person is preoccupied with and focused on themselves alone. Intimacy is an imagined, suggested component of the social fabric. The scenes of the actions are interiors, architectural structures, urban spaces, which in turn give hints of a real correspondence and location through precise details, and yet remain ambiguous. Almost always visible is the blue sky, which opens up like an escape, a silver lining.

The hand gestures that decisively define the relationships between the figures are particularly striking: a provocatively extended little finger, the demonstrative middle finger, a protective and a teasing hand, tickling under the chin, a rough embrace, a hold. Like invisible threads, lines of connection weave through the image—in an attempt to establish kinship in Haraway's sense—and shape the narrative. *You are Someone like You* (2023) shows two people in front of a public square with a fountain. A parasol provides them with shade. They are facing each other, but again they are not looking at each other. One of the two, wearing an ornamented green shirt, looks out of the picture plane at the viewer. The right arm is clum-

sily, almost roughly wrapped around the shoulders of the person in red to their right, holding their head with their hand, pressing against it, clinging. The left arm hangs down, hand spread away from the body and, quite incidentally, lays itself protectively and dominantly over the head of the person sitting on the steps in the background—subtle compositional lines that tell of social, asymmetrical relationships and power relations.

Playing games of string figures is about giving and receiving patterns, dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn't there before, of relaying connections that matter, of telling stories in hand upon hand, digit upon digit, attachment site upon attachment site, to craft conditions for finite flourishing on terra, on earth.
–Haraway, p. 10.

De Verteuil's allegorical oil paintings refer to the fundamental need for connection, love and affection—with all the disappointments, insecurities, destructive potentials, and tensions that, through the exaggerated staging, here and there deliberately tip over into the absurd and transcendent. In some cases, the portraits and scenes leave earthly realms and are exaggerated—in reference to early Gothic iconographic painting—into depictions of saints. In *12 Chelsea (Rainbow)* (2023), the lower part of the painting depicts an everyday situation of the artist's family in Trinidad in the sunny backyard—two children playing, one climbing on the mother's back, the other running across the lush green lawn, the father lost in thought, spreading his arms, ready to fly. Above them, encircled by a rainbow, the Holy Family keeps watch.

And the dreams that you dream of once in a lullaby.

Text: Miriam Bettin