

Sophie von Hellermann

Love's Labour's Lost

Opening: August 30th, 6 – 9 pm
August 30th – September 28th, 2024
Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf

I would characterise Sophie von Hellermann's paintings as whimsical in the extreme—if I were more of an internet-person, I might add the trending suffix “-core.” Whimsy-core is a condition so rarely come across it almost figures a kind of contradiction, whimsy—a capricious floundering this way and that, never touching ground long enough to stake a claim—being, in a certain sense, inherently opposed to extremity. But contradiction is sustenance to these works, where bright flashes of colour swirl in the way of light or liquid, as if they might evacuate the canvas in the blink of an eye and without a trace, like a dream, escaping even our memory.

This partly comes down to how von Hellermann rarely outlines a figure – you'd be hard pressed to find a clean silhouette in any of her paintings – partly to the clear luminescence of the acrylic paint, and partly, also, to the particular velocity, or energy, with which every piece is imbued. Von Hellermann works on the floor, conjuring her motif from the centre and outwards in what often becomes a centrifugal composition. And this might be one source of said velocity. Another – practical, too, in nature – is that her method requires a certain expedience: applying the pigments directly onto the canvas, she has no time to waste. This is how she achieves the impression of levity; the fluorescent flashes amidst the suppleness of shapes, the richness of colour. But expedience, in its turn, demands stamina, it puts the body under duress. Another irony inherent to this work is that it takes laborious effort to make painting look this casual.

Here we find one possible reason for the exhibition title's invocation of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*. Where there's love there's labour – and hopefully the other way around – and if you love something, you must, as the saying goes, also be prepared to let it go. This is true for paintings leaving the studio just as children leaving the nest. But likewise for the more ephemeral, *whimsical*, things in life.

That Shakespeare's play is suffused with trickery, illusion; confusion as to who's who, what's real and what's not, is just as apt when it comes to von Hellermann's paintings. A comedy, it features a group of men attempting to swear off women in order to focus on more substantial things, and, through a series of absurd twists and narrative conceits of course failing miserably. When, finally, at the death of the King, all weddings are postponed for three years, their efforts at reigning in love, and defeat in the face of it, turn out to have been utterly in vain.

One interpretation of the play's title is that there has been so much talk of love that any further labour invested in that pursuit will already be wasted. This very much remains the case to this day where every pop song is a love poem, making the theme of love is so great that it loses its outline, becomes available as an allegory for almost anything else.

In a similar way, von Hellermann's paintings are so lavish, so in excess of their own atmosphere, they seem to hover on the brink of (non-)presence. This is what makes them feel precious, too, intangible; like you'd better get your look before they disappear. In the exhibition, love is figured as an endless blue ocean, daytime reverie, a psychedelic dance; it is a costume you put on, so many letters sent, a trip to hell and back. But on a more fundamental level – qua their status and quality as paintings – love is also an opportunity to imagine a different life, another kind of world: it is an invitation to suspend disbelief.

In *Hamlet* the famous question goes: is the Prince of Denmark mad or not? But I think we might likewise ask of the shallow deceptions, the gender fraud and bed tricks, that usher along the plots in comedies like *Love's Labour's Lost*, whether the characters really do fall for them, or whether the disguise of a wig, or that of darkness, is not rather an excuse that allows both parties to break out of normative confines and indulge their fantasy? Do we not want, sometimes, to be tricked? Is that not where the joy of fiction starts, of theatre, of art?

When von Hellerman invites us to suspend disbelief, and we accept the invitation into her topsy-turvy, barely tied-down world, we cannot feign innocence. Even amidst so much whimsy, we are already co-conspirators – whatever ambivalence rears its head, whatever the comedown of the next day, we've already agreed to it. Such is the contract of the comedy: it is funny because it bites; it offers the appearance of lightness only in the way that a *trompe l'oeil* does the illusion of space. The real point lies elsewhere, one step over, where the illusion starts to crack.

I wonder if we might think of von Hellermann's art vis-à-vis the classical genre of the vanity painting, though not for the traditional items – flowers and game and shellfish – but more abstract rushes of emotion like expectation, abandon, the pang of freedom and of risk. Such things, too, take measure of time, acting as sparks along the trajectories of our lives that are as real (and so as vulnerable to decay) as anything else. Even the experience of having believed a fiction with hindsight relies on a certain levity, or naivety, which we rarely allow ourselves – as time goes by, even less so. In von Hellermann's paintings we find illusion, too, laid out on the table of vanities, as an item of luxury on which the clock is ticking, liable to escape our grasp.

When at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*, the unreality and temporal suspension in which the characters have indulged breaks, it is with mortality at the door: the Princess's father dies, duty calls. I've always felt that von Hellerman's paintings contain just the slightest touch of such a melancholic awareness; the light knock on the door of this inevitable wakeup call. Perhaps, in this exhibition, the painting *My Love* comes closes to spelling it out: a woman in a green field envisioning the stick figure of her lover, due to blow away with the next gust of wind. But this quality could just be what ties von Hellermann's paintings down nonetheless; in fact, what allows us to experience them at all. Something of love's labour is always lost – I think mostly our ability to enjoy the fruits of it. It is not possible to have one without the other: love, loss. With her art, von Hellermann gives us both at the same time. Whimsy in extremis is its own form of honesty.

Text

Kristian Vistrup Madsen