

Olivia van Kuiken

Losing looking leaving

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Olivia van Kuiken frequently refers to her strategy as “elliptical,” which is demonstrated both formally and in subject. Her practice is marked by this plurality as she surfs around in a universe populated by Sadian violence, technological sympathies, and lyrical poetry. The work lingers around associations and disrupted trains of thought, the bedrocks of linguistic play. Imaginal complexes are thus achieved through the abstraction and repetition of van Kuiken’s chosen forms. Her research heavy field of vision is constantly renegotiated, though she’s inclined to represent familiar subjects that echo from the past. After all, images belong to no one, it’s all a mere shuffling between artists and generations alike.

Earlier yet, van Kuiken read Peter Weiss’s absurdist play *Marat/Sade*, which imparts the ethos of Artaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty* and serves as a central reference in the solo exhibition *Losing looking leaving*. Set in the wake of the French Revolution, this play is formatted in layers. The death of Jean-Paul Marat is a dramatic core, with political discourse ensuing between him and his killer, Charlotte Corday. Vibrating above this is a production that Marquis de Sade stages in light of Marat’s murder, with asylum inmates as actors. The sentiments of his production are largely nihilistic in response to Sade’s understanding of politics as hopeless. Not only is refracted storytelling of interest to van Kuiken, but also the dark tone of Weiss’s text, an aspect which persists within the painter’s field of interest. She also contends with the writer’s reflexive formal and content interventions.

Set design is embedded within the artist’s lexicon, emerging as a central point in the present body of work. *Nude Descending The Staircase -1* sees van Kuiken’s absorption of Italian stage designer Carlo Vigarani’s influence. Vigarani’s stage design for the climax of *Les Plaisirs de l’Île Enchantée* represents “the palace of Versailles on fire.” Demonstrated here, and per the innovations of Western set design, space is manufactured. Another sympathetic version of the subject is James Ensor’s *Le Feu d’artifice* (Fireworks), which was executed in 1887. Here, the Belgian painter depicts a cacophony of fire against a nocturnal sky. The amassed pigments provide a counterpoint to van Kuiken’s typically flat surfaces, which align more closely to the two-dimensionality that Greenberg championed. Her subdued palette also reorients the bold display of fire into a metered one.

The artist veers away from edges without abandoning them entirely. She foregrounds color theory as a vessel for art’s expressive capabilities, picking up on the tenets of

Kazimir Malevich and Josef Albers while pushing the potential of the medium into and through the twenty first century. To walk away from a canvas and feel its undulations long after being enveloped in the aura is an experience that Albers is sympathetic to. In his illuminating text *Interaction of Color* Albers writes, "The fact that the after-image or simultaneous contrast is a psycho-physiological phenomenon should prove that no normal eye, not even the most trained one, is foolproof against color deception. He who claims to see color independent of their illusionary changes fools only himself, and no one else." Adhering to this, van Kuiken traces the interrelations of pigment with a scientific attention to the ways in which frictions breed new sensations: an orange set beside green transforms both colors at once.

Diluted vanishing points are thus van Kuiken's solutions for the problem of perspective. She zeroes in on the orientating factors within a picture plane and disrupts them in order to engender a new perceptual experience. As such, the viewer can latch onto specific points of orientation, only to be cast away in the next instance. On a similar note, Viktor Shklovsky writes that "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony." In this essay, titled "Art as Technique," he elaborates on the techniques that a creator leverages in their articulation of a particular version of things. Van Kuiken champions a defamiliarization that Shklovsky describes, extracting certain elements from her choice subjects and bringing them into an entirely new ecosystem.

Returning to the arena of set design, van Kuiken has executed an architectural intervention that reinforces her vested interest in theater and contextual arbitration. This intervention is perfectly exemplified through the experience of viewing *Dissonant perspectives*. To approach the painting, visitors must confront a ramp that leads to the work, which lands them squarely on a stage of van Kuiken's design. *Dissonant perspectives* functions not only as a backdrop for the action of the viewer and an imagined set for the play itself, but also as a critique of Op Art and the history of perception in art.

A final juncture within *Losing looking leaving* is a series of plaid paintings, which serve as a contrastive device. This is geometric abstraction in its most accessible form: a figure manifested as a zoetrope that collides with aggressive flatness. Consequently, these paintings naturally contradict the more chaotic pictorial logics of van Kuiken's set backdrop.

Text
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