

VISUAL ART

Nika Fontaine

by Benjamin Klein



The interior, visual qualities of Barker's drawings show exceptionally patient attention to detail. Even more to their credit, they are executed in a free and sensitive manner. There is neither stiffness nor excessive coldness as a cost for such precise lucidity. It takes weeks of carefully patient rendering by Barker to do a single drawing of some few square centimetres, a process which requires a tremendous ability to know the steps of the process in advance, and to deploy them at exactly particular moments. There is no trace at the end of a drawing that shows any indecision, corrections, erasing or almost of the making itself.

The meaning of the show resides in good part in Barker's questioning, in manifesting the duality of his grandfather's identity, and his own in distinction to his forebear's, as well as in the vacillating ocular qualities of the works.

There is an overflow of content, upbeat and humorous in its tenor, that quietly emerges in "Legacy." *Self Portrait as Robinson Crusoe* (where Barker seems bemused to be caught wearing a hat and fake beard which appear to have been made from a loaf of bread), or

Little Axe (in which a hand holds a tiny axe) both possess their own sort of quirky emotional atmosphere (*Little Axe* seems Lilliputian, and so maybe there are more references to the 18th-century English novel here than it seems—with attendant, questionable romantic explorer-type tropes). The show balances on a productive edge, between closed cipher and open book, where that initial mimetic ambiguity takes on a greater importance. Here, at least, in the possibility of our deception about the past or about history, about ourselves and our families, is a narrative smokescreen that reveals some truths in the act of exposing the closeted nature of the past. Maybe our anguished, contemporary, ruined sense of the real, or what's real, our fear of, but also our possible revelling in, simulated reality is what the real already is, and always was. ■

"Legacy" was exhibited at Galerie Laroche/Joncas, Montreal, from November 17 to December 22, 2016.

Benjamin Klein is a Montreal-based artist, writer and independent curator.

A lot of baggage can be said to attach to the term "spirituality." In the context of contemporary art, it seems fair to say that bringing spirituality directly into the conversation is rare, and for many reasons is generally considered to be maladroit, even inappropriate. Putatively, we know that many, if not most, people would suggest they have a spirituality of some kind. Probably even those of us who give the matter little thought do as well, to some degree. But any approach to manifesting it in the art world is generally mediated by layers of intellectual presentation and justification. At most, our artwork is expected to theorize our spirituality, not present it straightforwardly, much less embody it.

Which is why Nika Fontaine's work is so refreshing. Her exhibition "Heimat" at Galerie Joyce Yahouda in Montreal, curated by Yahouda and François Dell'Aniello, showcases several different but interconnected bodies of work, all of which are self-evidently unafraid of censure for having injected a strong dose of kitschy materials and mystical subject matter—as well as actual mysticism—directly into the matrix of the artwork. Her paintings can even be said to bring kitsch and spirituality into collision, at least for the artist, and to erase the boundaries between them without irony, in the hope that a form of transcendence will take place and become clear and accessible. Her work represents a defiant stance against embarrassment and shame with respect to supposedly respectable art norms, exposing some of their dignified self-regard as potentially rote academicism, perhaps even as arrogance. This is the position Fontaine has staked for herself, and is defending.



2



3

1. Ted Barker, *A Hundred Life Histories*, 2016, graphite on paper, 14 x 11 inches.

2. Nika Fontaine, *Schnell schnell #13*, 2015, glitter on canvas, 31 x 40 cm. All images courtesy Galerie Joyce Yahouda, Montreal.

3. Installation view, "Heimat," 2016, Galerie Joyce Yahouda.

The main room of the gallery is occupied by the work Fontaine is best known for in Canada to date, a 2016 series of glitter paintings on canvas called "Schnell Schnell" (the artist is Canadian but lived for several years in Berlin, from where she has exhibited different aspects of her production across Europe). These pieces on first glance recall Mark Rothko, and might seem to be mocking the high seriousness we attribute to his work—but not so, and after looking we can see that Fontaine is attempting to update the immanent sensations many people feel in front of

Rothko paintings. Her deployment of the shimmering glitter surface and use of a richly saturated and pleasurable colour palette is visually successful and straightforward, sufficient to convince us that she really means what she is saying. The question is, will we accept the invitation to interact with these paintings in the way she wants her audience to do, or should we just read them in strictly formal terms? It is possible that either way is fine. Still, the pieces do seem to present themselves as possible doorways to altered experience, if not literally to astral projection and subtle embodiment.

Eyes accustomed to making the rounds in a contemporary art context are generally initiated into a kind of measured understanding, so interacting with this work provides us with a chance to engage with a well-researched, thoroughgoing and rigorous practice that flouts the conventional, polite tropes of painting. Fontaine was a runner-up at the 2016 RBC Canadian Painting Competition for a piece from the "Schnell Schnell" series, but these are not the only interesting paintings in the show at Galerie Joyce Yahouda. Among other significant examples are a pair of large canvases from 2014, a scattershot in a field of figurative imagery across expanses of glittering space. Each of the images, chosen as signifiers and symbols, dares the viewer to read meaning into them, calling on the desire to decipher what hermetic messages they may be weaving together. What do scarabs, flags, musical notation, ice-cream sundaes, barbershop poles, classical columns and devil masks have in common? Maybe nothing, but charged proximity makes them

chime with potential hermeneutic possibilities. A number of works from 2015 also hanging in the gallery's second space are closer to combine, collage painting and use kitsch tropes even more openly. Small and dangling with fringes, bejewelled and adorned with hearts and pendants, they would seem to be curio-shop decorative objects if not for their precise, deliberate finish and careful, serial installation. The longer we spend with these pieces the more a kind of paradoxical sincerity seems to emanate from them, because they actually read as the coldest works in the show, the likeliest to have some sort of ironic message they want to share. Alone in the gallery's smallest room is *Zeta Pupis*, 2015, which is basically a purple glitter planet on black velvet, with some carefully painted, tape-like marks near its fringed edges. You can't get kitschier than this, but it works. After a few moments it's more like a devotional image than a winking inside joke, and self-aware as well.

An important aspect of this work which became very clear is that in reproduction the work does not present well. While that may be true of most painting to a good degree, there is a particular gulf between looking at these works on a screen or page and seeing the actual painting, one that provides a pleasant surprise. ■

"Heimat" was exhibited at Galerie Joyce Yahouda, Montreal, from November 24 to December 24, 2016.

Benjamin Klein is a Montreal-based artist, writer and independent curator.