

Screen around a Secret

"It is not true that the more you love, the better you understand; all that the action of love obtains from me is merely this wisdom: that the other is not to be known; his opacity is not the screen around a secret, but, instead, a kind of evidence in which the game of reality and appearance is done away with. I am then seized with that exaltation of loving *someone unknown*, someone who will remain so forever: a mystic impulse: I know what I do not know."

- from *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, 1978, by Roland Barthes

American artist Sebastian Blanck (b. 1976) creates painted and collaged assemblages and oil paintings of the people he loves: his wife, two young sons, and close friends. The works in *That's Why We're Running Away* underscore our human desire to hold on to fleeting memories or moments, and the inevitability of change.

Employing a distinctly personal technique, Blanck layers painted paper collage and water color on organic and hand made Japanese paper, which is moistened by the artist to make it more malleable, and then stretched. The weave and grain of the paper remain visible, and are the ground upon which the applied colors converse. The artist uses stencils to mask out the shapes and forms, and the edges of the collaged elements create the seams between each colored cut out shape, allowing Blanck to control the weight of a line. This is most beautifully articulated in *Blinding Light*. In this painting a woman lies on a dock above a lake. Glamour is heightened through contrasting color and sharp focus of line, and the edges of her body are simply yet deftly delineated by the paper's edges, as the artist draws inspiration from the sight of his exquisite wife in a lazy late afternoon repose. It is interesting to note that Blanck refers to the making of these collage paintings as assembling, as one might refer to sculpture, and indeed Blanck produces animations as part of his work, which capture and document the literal act of their making, showing exactly how they "come to be".

Blanck works from photographs, and uses the least means at his disposal to create the greatest visual and emotional impact on the viewer, with a consistent focus on form, feeling, shape and color. To compose *Haircut*, the bodies of mother and son are one lyrical shape, their forms reminiscent of a looping Japanese character. The artist has cropped the image closely, emphasizing a psychological feeling of containment. The child's hands clearly in movement, express his impatience, as he suffers an unwelcome intrusion on his play time. This is the only painting of its kind in the series, in which the eyes of the subject meet those of the viewer- pleading with the viewer- as if to say, how much longer will this last? When can I break free? With gentle foresight, the artist, as father, is predicting a son's future adolescence.

Evoking Jean Francois Millet's (1814 – 1875) *The Gleaners* (1857), *Red Towel*, depicts a woman in the late afternoon, leaning down to pick up a towel on a lake's wooden dock; an elusive figure, her face is obscured by a large hat. Like Millet's gleaners, she is hemmed in by the horizon line, suggesting that she is burdened, and symbolizing an inability to ascend from that place. Unlike Millet's socio-political statement (as to the status of the Gleaner in society), Blanck's use of this convention seems rather to signify the woman's spiritual state in that moment, leaving us to wonder at the hardships we all endure, despite surface appearances. As we press our faces against the glass window of his life, Blanck graces us with the poetry and nuance of his daily experiences, revealing to us the place where language and realism fall short.

Blanck's lusciously captivating *Isca*, is a perfect example of the artist's unique ability to transfix us by articulating a tremendous amount of information with seemingly very little effort and means. The larger part of this portrait is made up of raw Japanese paper, Isca's eyes a mesmerizing mediation in which the artist fully immerses us, and her hair simple and flat, yet with volume. Very little collage has been used in this work- just a tender moment here and there- the light gently gracing the side of her face, a face of great dignity and intelligence, the container for her own private world. Her lips, a bubble gum pink, are a reminder of her striking youth. Looking forwards and backwards, Blanck collapses fine detail with washes of color, soft edges with hard, and captures the essence of Isca, throughout time.

While the collaged water color assemblages make up the larger part of his oeuvre, Blanck has more recently begun to explore oils on canvas, and he sets himself a task of making one painting a day. This self imposed structure forces Blanck to work in such a way that is intuitive and quick, where his decisions cannot be overly labored or considered. Trusting his impulses and choices along the way, he never works from preparatory drawings, and adapts his process when confronting each new obstacle in his path, always seeking to push the potential of his material, and allow for mistakes and new possibilities. He revels in the unintended moments and surprises, when things are not perfectly worked out. Through diligent repetition, changes emerge and subtly layer upon themselves, and new meanings and patterns of behavior arise. Like the ever changing expressions and movements of a new born baby, these subtle shifts and discoveries keep the work in constant movement and flux.

Blanck credits Edouard Vuillard (1868-1940) and Pierre Bonnard (1867 -1947) as influences on his work, and while one can readily appreciate their legacy, Blanck's use of one unifying ground color (which is often the raw paper or canvas) and flat planes of color to create form, are a strict departure. These differences place Blanck in closer company with artists such as Henri Matisse (1869-1954), Tom Wesselmann (1931-2004) and Alex Katz (b.1927). While it must be

noted that Blanck worked as an assistant for Katz in the late 1990's, Blanck's work departs significantly from Katz in its obvious psychological intimacy with subject, and the evidence of Blanck's ever-present and distinct hand in the work. Furthermore, where one finds distance and an austere remove from the subject in Katz's paintings, Blanck embraces the unique individuality of his loved ones, revealing to us, with profound tenderness, universal human truths, and our inescapable connectedness. The pull Blanck feels towards his friends and family beckons us, just as they do he; we find ourselves both welcomed and embraced by these paintings, as we see ourselves and our hopes and dreams reflected back to us.

Blanck explores the lives of his children and their imaginative inner worlds in oil paintings such as *Lake Walk*, *Snow Light*, and *Crossing the Lake*. In each of these paintings Blanck exploits the use of packed snow as a compositional device in which to explore the nature of his sons' relationship, and highlight and accentuate the vastness of the world the two inhabit, and perhaps the future they face. The figures are not clearly defined, the viscosity of the oil paint is exploited to loosely define features, often revealed by just one or two abstract strokes of a brush. *Snow Light* feels like a moon landing. The long shadows suggest that it is late afternoon or early evening, and there is little brightness on the packed snow. One boy is held in a diamond of light, and the other looks on from the foreground, his shadow an old person with a walking stick. The sled is a simply articulated disc – a finger print of blue- and a perfect shape for the the warm small body it will hold. The horizon, marked by trees, is finite, and a symbol of the future that lies ahead, and the passage of time.

In *Crossing the Lake*, we see a boy in a canoe, paddle ready and facing the elements, as if going into battle. The white caps of the lake are exaggerated, and there is a play of scale to enhance a sense of drama. In *Throwing Stones on a Still Lake* the boy's body is as limber and lyrical as the tree's branches, each leaf beautifully articulated and an artist's meditation of exquisite detail; a dance with the landscape. Like Winslow Homer's (1836-1910) *Boys in Dory* (1873) we see boys at play, and can imagine their conversation and intimacy from afar.

With deft precision and skill, and an obvious pleasure in material, Blanck manipulates paper and paint with extreme tenderness of feeling to unearth the unseen. There is indeed a desire to *run away* (as reflected in the exhibition's title) and get lost in Blanck's evocative and very beautiful paintings, and to suspend time. His paintings are an expression and imprint of the feelings that connect us with one another, and with the earth, and cosmos.

Lisa Ivorian-Jones
August 2016