

frieze

...Hounded by External Events...

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Januar 2017

Maureen Paley, London UK



Serban Savu, *The Card Players*, 2011, oil on canvas, 135 x 180 cm. Courtesy: David Nolan Gallery, New York and Maureen Paley, London; © Serban Savu

With a title taken from the autobiography of poet Stephen Spender and a number of lengthy quotations on the gallery walls, this group show, curated by novelist and critic Michael Bracewell, looks to the written word for tone and context. There's an explanation of existentialism ('The refusal to belong to any school of thought') from Walter Kaufmann, a short fragment by Søren Kierkegaard ('I conceived it as my task to create difficulties everywhere') and a line from a book by Samuel Hynes about literature and politics in 1930s England ('They were denying the ancestors that the past had provided').

To take a sentence, a paragraph, or just a few lines from a larger text allows meaning to shift. Here, these quotes can be read as statements about the position of the artist, both in

relation to the history of art and to current events. It presents a sombre context for work that is often already quite bleak, such as John Kelsey's series 'Dans la rue' (In the Street, 2016) – seven small watercolours depicting street fights. The scenes, rendered in traditional techniques, are reminiscent of 17th-century figure studies painted from posed mannequins – though these images of brawls on sidewalks and subways are mainly familiar from street photography quickly snapped on a camera-phone and distributed instantly. By replicating such scenes in watercolour, Kelsey creates an aesthetic that is at once violent and appealing.



'...HOUNDED BY EXTERNAL EVENTS...', exhibition view, Maureen Paley, London, 2016. Courtesy: Maureen Paley, London

Three paintings by the Romanian artist Serban Savu similarly use a traditional format to stage contemporary scenes. His *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*–like oil on canvas, *Small Talk After Lunch* (2012), presents labourers wearing denim and work boots lying on a patch of grass. Though they take place in parks and public spaces, Savu's depictions of life in the former USSR are overshadowed by the greyness of the post-Soviet architecture that looms in the background. A similar environment is repeated in Andrew Miksys's photographs, which document bleak sceneries and interiors in his native Lithuania.

Along with pencil-drawn portraits by Lucy McKenzie of the Cambridge Five – the spy ring who were recruited by Moscow while at the elite university in the 1930s – a number of the pieces in the show relate to the former USSR and its dependent countries. This thematic

relationship is not explicitly discussed, a blindspot that sustains a certain prejudice which equates that region with a certain grimness. It's especially dissonant considering that the other works on view – two untitled drawings on paper partially mounted on glass (both 2016) by Nick Mauss; a 1994 work by Gareth Jones, David Bowie Memorial Carport, which now can't but seem prescient; and a portrait by Kaye Donachie (Did You Ever Think of Me, 2016) in her signature dark, restrained style – do not wear their social and political engagement on their sleeves.



Andrew Miksys, Untitled, Pabradė, Lithuania, 2004, digital c-print, 50 x 60 cm. Courtesy: Maureen Paley, London; © Andrew Miksys

The paragraph from which the exhibition's title was taken reads: 'From 1931 onwards, in common with many other people, I felt hounded by external events.' And, though Spender was referring to the crises of the 1930s and the rise of fascism, the sentiment seems ever more current in the political climate of late 2016: from the war in Syria to the widespread angst over the Brexit vote and the election of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and Donald Trump in the US. The atmosphere of anxiety on view might cause us to reflect on the idea that every historical moment is haunted by the spectres of the past and that history is doomed to repeat itself. It's a forbidding and pessimistic view; it's also a very contemporary one.