

ADRIAN GHENIE - Disturbing Dichotomies and *New Paintings*

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It is impossible to categorize the curious pleasure that emerges when our most complacent knowledge is challenged. Without doubt, Pace Gallery's current exhibition of 13 paintings by Romanian-born Adrian Ghenie beggars complacency. Its oscillation between figuration and abstraction might even provoke a reexamination of aesthetic taxonomies.

In Ghenie's compositions, the dialogue between abstract and figurative elements is hardly trifling. It insinuates itself everywhere, quietly reminding us that the distinction between the two is a convenience, as fictional as the slapstick convention structuring the artist's "Pie Fight" series—a sequence to which many of the works on view belong. The paintings force acknowledgment of what everybody knows and forgets: figurative art is always already abstract, just less honest about it. Figuration's cult of mimesis strains to conceal artifice; abstraction lays it bare.



Adrian Ghenie, *Persian Miniature*, 2013, oil on canvas, 118-1/8 x 114-3/16". © the artist; image © Pace Gallery.

Ghenie's works often brood on history and its injustices. Some pieces in his "Pie Fight" series isolate characters from film stills of comedic pastry wars and radically re-contextualize them, mingling those figures with iconic images from Nazi history. The consequence is an erasure of the separation between fictional comedy and historical tragedy, between the unexpected poignancy of anonymous pie fight victims and the bathos of calculated Fascist grandeur.

But it is the intense aesthetic conflict—the uneasy exchange between abstract and figurative elements - that makes all these works worth viewing. Abstraction and figuration tear at their very seams. Though the paintings nearly always contain figural elements, abstraction is never far, clouding backgrounds with improbable tempests, dissolving tassels of rugs.

“Persian Miniature” (2013) invokes and reveals the thinness of artifice’s disguise; the very title embodies the paradox of the truthful lie. Neither a ‘miniature’ (this is the largest work in the exhibition) nor an adherent to other conventions of that genre, the work unfolds in a grove of birches devoured by winter. Yet, the right-hand third of the canvas rebels, refusing to sustain the conceit. Trees occupying that representational netherworld turn changelings; the intricate bark patterns so convincingly rendered elsewhere turn stylized, as if dreaming they were the painted eyes that danced on prows of ancient ships as they cleaved the Aegean.

Similarly, abstraction laps at the edges of “Pie Fight Interior 8” (2012). A pie-splattered woman occupies what is both the center of the room and the canvas. The floor dissolves at the subject’s feet into a cacophony of pigments. The intervention of abstraction shivers across the composition—indeterminacy of pure pigment rises along an edge of the tapestry, while dress patterns turn apostate: careful, open circles weep into irregular red splotches. In other works, resolute armchairs stand against backdrops filled with pigment as unpredictable as summer rain; a seated figure’s leg withers to a mere intimation of form; through erstwhile windows the world turns grisaille and fills with the unlicensed offspring of Chagall crossed with Goya.

These paintings do not oppose abstraction and figuration; they demand we acknowledge how artificial their separation is—and Ghenie’s skill at figuration lends that demand its vitality. Though his formative training was limited to outdated textbooks, his study of Old Masters was not in vain. His skill in illusionism enables these paintings to reveal how the genesis of figuration lies with abstraction; “abstract” and “figurative” are neither impermeable categories nor cladistic strangers. What appear to be actual books overflowing on an oak table are single horizontal brush strokes—nothing more. Perfect pleats on a dress prove merely uniform black vertical lines upon a green ground. Luxuriant ferns are a flurry of impatient paint on canvas. The collapse of distinctions cuts both ways. Drip painting could be custard; errant vertical strokes may signal change in the weather. Put differently, this is not a representational war. There is no meaningful outcome, no ‘victor.’ The abstraction spreading across canvas may be a revenging angel of Modern Art or it may be a universe of pigment on the cusp of domestication by figuration. In this world, Art is refused the comfort of entelechy.

Performing this drama of representational conflict and collusion demands a big stage. Accordingly, it is the large format works that are most compelling. As the exhibition progresses, works taper to smaller portraits that cannot inspire the same experiential intrigue with which larger paintings—simultaneously imperious and fragile—tempt viewers to invent their own shadow-plays while offering no tales of their own.

More is at stake than conventional ideas about abstraction and figuration. Ultimately, the alternation between opposition and fusion of the two unsettles the compositions, infusing them with a sense of risk, of invasion. Aggressive overpainting refuses the works the sanctity of diegesis. None of these paintings is granted what Art so often takes for granted. No imaginary Maginot Lines protect these painted worlds. None is spared drip-painted invasion; there is always ambiguity about what elements belong in the painting and which are dropped over it as an afterthought. The relief of taxonomic clarity is denied.