

Saskia Te Nicklin “Ham-Fisted Garden Party” at Vin Vin / Ruyter, Vienna

“Humanism takes possession and melts all human activities into one. ... It digests all their violences and worst excesses; it makes a white, frothy lymph of them.”

-Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea*

Saskia Te Nicklin’s collages and drawings are oozing with the human, the all too human. Like oversized tarot cards, the aluminum panels show similarities to allegorical depictions, focusing on those moments of human existence that are commonly met with disapproval and disgust. Laziness and lethargy, gluttony and greed are among the qualities embodied in the panels’ pale, misshapen protagonists. The gestures performed by the bloated, wobbly creatures with their deformed limbs appear somewhat languid, sluggish. Their minimal facial expressions speak of restlessness and discomfort. The effect is amplified by the chosen materials: Te Nicklin sketches her ideas on construction plastic sheeting, using children’s colour pens and neon markers. She then uses wood glue to paint over the drawings. As it dries, the white glue absorbs the colours, and the resulting blurry lines that glow from within the pasty gelatinous bodies add to their ghostly appearance. As it hardens, the glue contracts, which makes for brittle edges, cracks and holes that seem like burnt into the figures’ bright flesh. Thick and white in some areas, thinner and more transparent in others, their wavy surface obtains additional folds and wrinkles from the plastic sheets that serve as original support. Te Nicklin peels the dried white substance off the plastic like dead sunburnt skin. After that, she assembles the parts in literal collages, sticking them on to the aluminum parts using a thin layer of the same glue they are made of. Sometimes she adds something extra: symbolic elements, a strange redundant limb or just a piece of white jelly in the shape of a slug. Using a graphite stick, she emphasizes their features, thereby enhancing the figures’ bodily presence. The gargantuan size of their bodies, their brittle materiality, the pasty hue of their skin, their bumpkinish gestures, the lack of self-awareness in their faces—all of that together makes these humanoids seem like grotesque and obscene fools. Lacking any visible sexual organs, the pale nudity of these cumbersome giants is, however, not devoid of a certain sexual aggressivity, at times accentuated by a deliberately ham-fisted symbolism in an overflow of attributes such as cucumbers or fleshy bees.

The hard contrast between the plastic, tactile materiality of the collaged figures and the cold, flat metallic surface of the panels isolates the figures from their support and leaves them in a state of in-between: suspended somewhere between the pictorial field of the panels and the real space that they share with us. Like bog bodies, preserved in marshland and pulled out centuries after their death, they appear to be at the same time full bodies and flattened, deformed representations of these same bodies. Neither fully here nor there, they seem to haunt us like zombies or ghosts, like memories of bodily sensations we prefer to forget—manifestations of our base selves. They remind us of those weak moments in which we are ashamed of ourselves and slightly repulsed by our own idleness and ignorance, our heinous feelings and vile instinctive reactions. Unlike the picture of Dorian Gray, however, they do not show the unfiltered ugliness of the dark side of our souls in its gruesome entirety. Instead, they look like the sickly sweet self-disgust we feel in our stomachs after all feelings of repulsion and self-hate have been digested by our undiminished self-love. There is a lot of comedic sympathy for the inept, awkward, greedy—but still lovable—idiot in Te Nicklin’s work. In her watercolours, left-handed Te Nicklin doubles the clumsiness of her right hand when she draws her figures with both hands at the same time, seeking a more naïve quality than she could expect from her stronger and more experienced hand alone. The pairs of naked humanoids drawn in this way always retain a certain air of innocence; they do so when they are marching together, their bodies awkwardly bent, in an opulent environment of fat and overripe nature; and even when they are lying one on top of the other in what seems like a violent sexual encounter, under attack from a flight of fearsome looking fleshy bees. It is the ambivalent and often disturbing innocence of the art

of mentally ill people like the Gugging artists that seems to be a point of reference for some of Te Nicklin's artistic strategies.

In the same room in which the watercolours are presented, fat flowers, cut out from the same construction plastic sheets used for the glue works, are distributed on the floor. The naïve natural environment of the drawings seems to enter the real space of the exhibition and involve its audience. Pieces of trash among the flowers bring to mind humankind's careless and harmful negligence toward nature, destroying any semblance of an idyllic ambience. In the room of the glue collages, the metal panels—some of them empty—confront visitors with their own reflection. The hazy, distorted shapes that are thrown back at you do not allow for a clear image, but they do give you a sense of your own presence and that of other people in the exhibition space. There is a vague kind of resonance that activates you, draws you in. This is not about somebody else—the ignorant others that we must fight. This is about you, me, all of us. Humans.

For Sartre's protagonist Roquentin, the humanist must be misanthropic to a certain extent. "But he must be a scientist as well to have learned how to water down his hatred, and hate men only to love them better afterwards." (Sartre, *Nausea*) These words are true for Saskia Te Nicklin. Her satire, her sarcastic view of human weakness does not at any point turn bitter or cynical. The humanism in her works has an inclusive quality that the anti-humanist Sartre refuses to see. It differs from the classic humanist focus on human reason and brings our soft spots, our weaknesses, our imperfect bodies into the picture, thusly decentring the humanistic view of the moral subject. Not in an apologetic way; rather, as a sincere version of "know thyself" that enables us to deal with the absurd and grotesque sides of human existence.

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