

Independent

Stanislava Kovalcikova on How Art Revitalizes the Viewer

by Francesca Gavin

The weight of art history lies heavily on painting. Stanislava Kovalcikova does not resist this history. Instead, her paintings play with the legacy of Post-Impressionists like Gauguin or Van Gogh, repositioning them in the contemporary, post-psychological and post-feminist landscape of modern experience.

This is figurative work in which the body is a stand in for the mind. The female nude and body as eroticized and objectified are ongoing issues in Kovalcikova's work. Refreshingly, the artist turns this history on its head. "I guess sex [and gender] is the first language we all speak," she suggests, when prompted on the strange erotic nature of her canvases. In *The Overlook Step (Shelly)* (2021) a female figure wearing white knee length boots raises her dress to step on a turtle. Her exposed leg combines the possible moment of violence with notions of power and underpins a disturbing tension. The vibrant red of her underskirt shines out, forcing our attention to the sexualization of the image.

There is far more to her characters than a direct read on the representation of desire. The androgynous female figures in her work, for example, are a kind of stand in for the artist herself. "I am attracted to women," the artist notes. "I think that [sexualized] representations of the passive female are outdated in our society. With internet pornography, the once mysterious has become reproducible. I try to win back this territory on the canvas." The characters in her narrative pieces are often active - holding hands, walking or touching - but always aware that they are being looked at. Directing their gaze to the viewer is a way for the artist to empathise and communicate with her intended audience. "I would not go so far as to say that art is empathy, but art revitalizes the viewer," she notes. "For the viewer, it opens up endless possibilities. It gives you the opportunity to review and recognize things you never saw in that light before."



The paintings Kovalcikova will exhibit in her US debut with Peres Projects at Independent were created between 2015 and 2021, and will introduce the broader spectrum of her work to an American audience. "The works start with 'pseudo' representational painting/portraiture which dissolves into an inner still-life/mental landscape of those being portrayed," the artist explains.

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“As a painter, I do not have a pressing concept or agenda, I let my ideas evolve and see where they take me. This is why I am glad to be able to show the evolution of my work over the last six years.” For Kovalcikova, the move from the sexual to the intimate and mature is close to “a tectonic psychological shift”.

Much of the Slovakian artist’s work takes time, with paintings evolving over several years, “almost like a fungus, beneath the surface” she explains. “I start with one image which ends up in a smudged, sanded, overpainted state. Images never die, unlike humans. Some get destroyed or disappear. My images age and undergo alterations.” Kovalcikova’s paintings speak to the way humans come to terms with trauma, the experience of dissociation and remembrance.

Her colour palette is muted, focusing on brown and earth tones. This is something she credits to the layering that is built into the process of creating her work. “The palette becomes greyish and muted, even though you can still see the brightness of the underpainting. Working slowly allows me to have the benefit of doubt, as well as not having to be 100% aware of what it is that I am doing,” she observes. “For years, I used to paint very dark pictures before I found the right ratio of light to illuminate the darkness. There are shades like chromoxide green, oxide red, sky blue, indigo and medieval yellow that are essential to my palette, because I have worked with these colours for years and feel that I can really navigate them on the canvas.”

Kovalcikova’s works feel intimate. As a teenager she would create very large works, but in the years since attending art school in Düsseldorf, where she studied with Peter Doig, she has moved to a smaller scale. Perhaps it is the directness of this scale that is so attractive, as she points out: “I’m not a painter who likes to waste colour and space.” Her works average around three feet in size, at times expanding to nine feet. They are human sized.

