

THE COMIC ARTIST

Ansel Krut is fond of spirals, vortices and whirlpools. He paints them fast and loose, using a native restlessness to keep thought from getting in the way of good work. So how does he know he's on the right track? When the painting makes him laugh.



ROWS OF SMALL, carefully resolved colour drawings line much of the available wall space of Ansel Krut's Dalston studio, in Hackney, London. *Citizen Bottle* (2009) began life as a loose sketch before being turned into one of these drawings. In the finished oil painting, a wine-bottle motif is set down upon the corner of a table within an indeterminate field of nicotine-ochre. The vessel's bulging sides convey a large intake of breath, which immediately lends it a human personality. Stuffed onto the neck of the bottle-body is a half-apple shape, which also resembles a pair of buttocks, at the centre of which is situated a singing mouth, or arsehole. The two raised green wings that grow out and up from the centre of the body rouse his audience, the viewer, to join in a chorus. This bon viveur's face is furnished with a Dalí-esque waxed moustache, which is repeated and blurred to approximate drunken double vision, and simultaneously suggests a set of eyes. Hovering

above this head is a comical brown ten-gallon hat. Krut demonstrates a Surrealist's facility for perceiving links between the most disparate commonplace objects and having them perform dual functions. It is by attending to the logic that an initial motif triggers, and allowing a character to reveal itself, that the artist arrives at, or discovers, a painting. He continues this quest for the unexpected and marvellous from one work to the next, but is kept in check by a low boredom threshold that prevents the artist repeating himself.

Krut took up painting 30 years ago, when he enrolled in a fine art degree course at University of the Witwatersrand, in his native Johannesburg. Moving to London in 1982, and going on to study at the Royal College of Art, he felt the full impact of currents emanating from the Royal Academy's seminal 1981 *New Spirit in Painting* exhibition. Like many of his fellow students, Krut was heavily influenced by Guston, de Kooning and others featured in that show, but earlier European painting, especially the horror and morbidity he witnessed in Goya, soon became as vital to his development. Those early influences have since been synthesised and distilled; and as a tutor at the Royal College for some years now, he, in turn, is leaving his mark on younger painters.

It is literature, perhaps, more than anything else that fuels his imagination these days. Rather than providing a subject or narrative, however, it only ever functions as a point of departure for formal experimentation. Krut cites the futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and his skill for anthropomorphism and breathing life into inanimate objects as being particularly pertinent to his own project. Mythological tales of violence

are another source of inspiration. The instances of transformation described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* go some way towards explaining Krut's desire to mutate human beings into fantastical hybrid animals or flowers, and vice versa.

In the small painting *Giants of Modernism #1 (Vortex Head with Pipe)* (2009), the artist has composed a pontificating figure, whom he describes as a 'chinless wonder', entirely from vortex forms. The head, eyes, ears and mouth – which holds an exaggerated pipe – ludicrously dwarf the body, arms and legs, all of which are described with graphic black brushstrokes and filled with apparently arbitrary shades of orange, yellow and lilac. Krut, however, counter to the supposed practices of this imaginary procrastinating genius, prefers to execute his paintings rapidly, so as to curtail potentially debilitating decision-making processes and resist overworking an image.

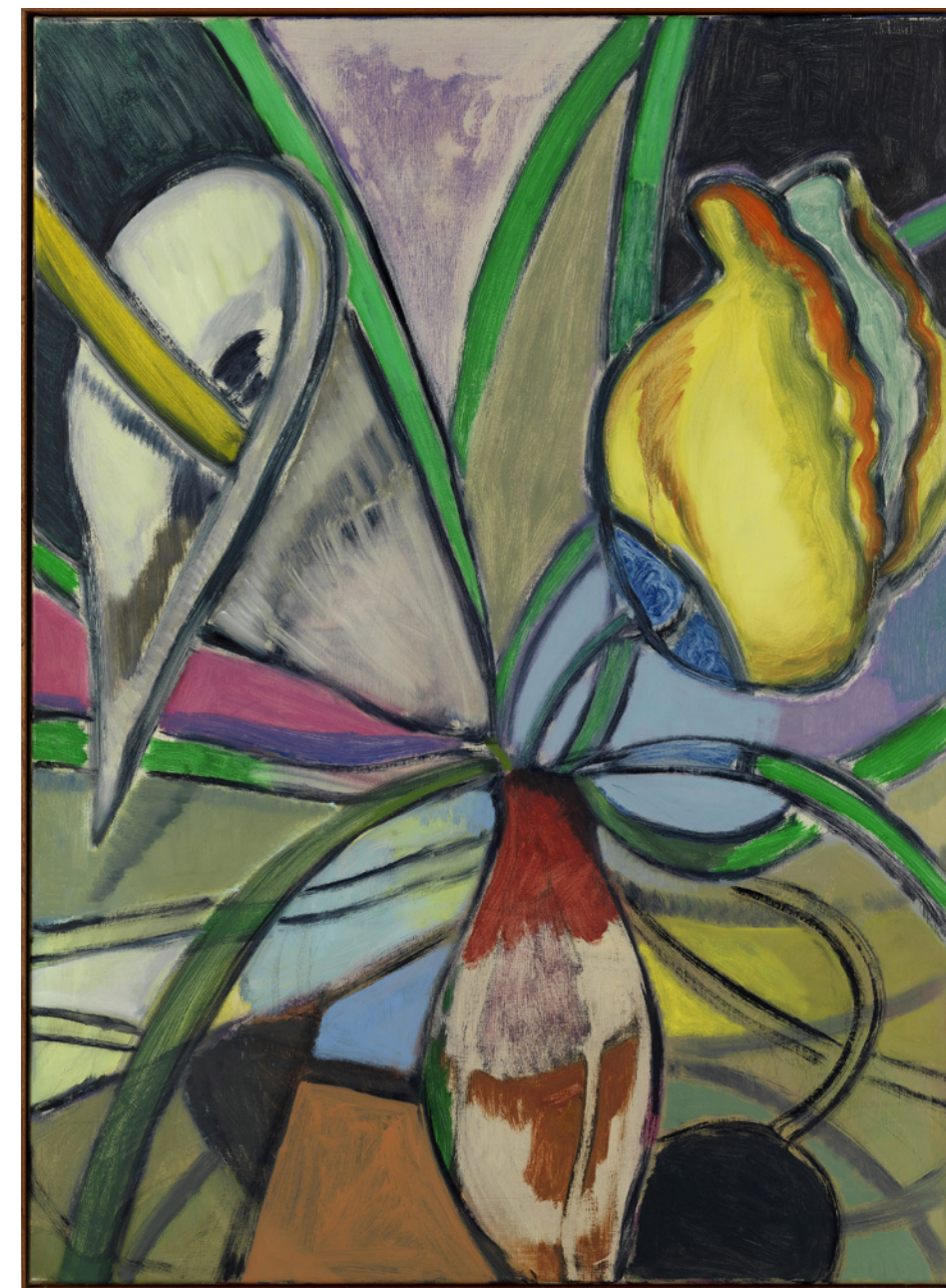
The artist has been using the whirlpool

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form in his paintings for several years, but of late it has proved a particularly productive device. By limiting himself to this single visual element, its various formal ambiguities become infinitely appealing. The optical effects of the spiral generate a confusion between beginning and end, inside and exterior space, negative and positive space, in many ways encapsulating and symbolising much of what painters have explored and attempted to articulate throughout history.

The colour and line of the comics Krut read as a child inform his practice more than ever. He recalled and borrowed the spiral motif from publications in which it often served as shorthand for an elbow or knee. *Vortex Man* (2009) has an unmistakable superhero dynamism about him. The figure lunges towards us with voluminous tubular limbs from a matt grey-green background that has the look of a worn schoolroom blackboard. The tornado from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) provides another plausible source for these writhing appendages, which, when considered in conjunction with the patina of the blackboard ground, evinces a nostalgic impulse. Here the head and face are conjured via a simply stencilled thin white line, bookended with perfect circles. This alien glyph floats free of the body, and provides an unexpected mechanical interlude.

Nine years ago Krut abandoned a more illustrative style of figuration, executed in a sombre palette, and began working in the singular manner for which he is known today. With this newfound freedom, the artist's sense of colour and humour was allowed to surface. Indeed, Krut claims to now know when a painting is headed in the right direction when it makes him laugh. Krut's paintings



reassert the primacy of the bodily and organic over interpretation and meaning. His amputated and spliced protagonists are often difficult to decipher visually, and the emotions and associations they evoke are correspondingly unsettling.

In *Mushroom* (2009) a number of blind, giant fungus dandies dressed in single trouser legs and clown boots stride confidently into one another, creating a central tangle of primary colour. Krut engenders these innocuous beige vegetables with a menacing air and a hint of arrogance. Signifying both fecundity and decay, these pranksters appear complicit in a joke that concerns the haphazard nature of life, its pitfalls and our inevitable demise.

An exhibition of work by Ansel Krut is on view at Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, 15 January – 13 February

above: *Tulip & Lily*, 2009, oil on canvas (framed), 110 x 80 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London

facing page: *Giants of Modernism #1 (Vortex Head with Pipe)*, 2009, oil on canvas (framed), 76 x 61 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London