

## Ansel Krut

*NJ Do you have a starting point to the exhibition, or is it placed as you felt?*

AK No, there isn't a start, it's much more to do with, when we brought the paintings into the space, where the works would fit comfortably. All the works were made in the last year and a half, and they were all made for this exhibition. I tend to work on the paintings all at the same time; some things were finished ahead of others, but were still in the same grouping. I like working in groups in a way; it takes a little while to get going, but when I've found a logic to the imagery, in a group of anywhere between eight and fifteen paintings, they form themselves around the same kind of ideas. The problem with that is when you finish

those paintings you have to start the whole process again, a new group. One could start looking at this exhibition with any of the paintings.

*I saw a little painting at Domobaal, and felt I was being drawn into some kind of game, being challenged certainly. There's a zestiness to it as well. Are you aware of others' reactions to your work?*

I tend not to be, to be perfectly honest. I do think there's quite a lot of humour there; something to do with the way the image is actually constructed in paint. Some of the paintings are reactive; I might make one painting in response to another. It's not the way I work usually but there have been moments. Coming into the studio I think, what shall I paint? I'll challenge myself, for instance by painting flowers.

I haven't painted flowers for maybe fifteen years. It's difficult to paint flowers because formally they're complex. Also the long history of flower painting means there are certain expectations in place for the genre. So in a way I try to make an image which acknowledges all that; at the same time undermines it a little bit, tries to set itself against it in some way. There is a degree of play, a responsiveness in myself to what I am doing on the canvas.

*A question I want to put to you is about the decisiveness in your paintings. It looks to me as if they're very direct and, I may be wrong, there isn't any alteration. With the drawing in 'Escalators', and the colouring, it's as if it's instant.*

That's the impression it could give, but it's completely untrue. I like the sense of immediacy, the feel of the paintings having emerged

from a sense of necessity, because they are what they are that to some extent; I'm simply transcribing something that already exists in the world. I always make a drawing - I make hundreds of drawings and I put them up on the wall. I look at the drawings, maybe one appeals to me as being the most likely to translate into painting. The relation of drawing and painting is very nuanced, layered, a subject in itself. In a case like the 'Escalator' painting, one day I felt I simply had to make a painting on an escalator, I've no idea why. Something about the shapes dropped into my imagination. I made a drawing of escalators which I felt reasonably comfortable about and then made the painting.

The painting isn't exactly like the drawing but it's close enough in composition. The basis of the painting was established fairly quickly, then

it didn't quite work so I made a few changes, then felt I'd lost it. I left it for a long time and eventually came back to it over several sessions. I shifted things very slightly, not so much the image itself as more to do with the relationship of image to ground, the spatial relationships. At a certain point it seemed to have got back to the original impulse, and at that point I felt it was working.

*Yes, it's a wonderful transformation, that's why I asked you what it was, and now I can see it. But it suggests more than itself, I'm seeing all sorts of crazy things, you know, which make me laugh. I don't know if that's an appropriate reaction.*

Laughter is good, I'm for laughter (*laughs*). If I find myself laughing in the studio then I usually take that as a good sign.

*How much is revealed of the narrative? I get the exhilaration of the image but I want to find the story; whether there should have to be an explanation.*

I explain paintings to myself and I think this sometimes gives clues to meaning, but I don't necessarily feel that's what the paintings are about. It does help me make decisions in the painting process. Sometimes it gives me an extra area to play around with, because I can deal with formal elements: colour, shape, scale and space. But then if I introduce the potential of narrative, it adds another layer of possibility and that seeps through into other decisions about making the painting. A more acid yellow inflects the tone of the narrative too, using a slightly richer colour might slow it down. They impact one on the other and will lead, suggest, deny or evoke relationships among themselves.

*You talk about working in phases, of starting over again, but does the chapter really end? Do you pick up from a previous phase and link that to what might be possible?*

I think that's a very good question. I think there are always links from one group of paintings to the next. Even within individual paintings I do not erase the previous spaces or decisions, in fact I often leave clues to the difficulty in making these choices, the possibilities those choices open up. The fact that I have taken one route as opposed to another, or that I've suggested one route and then deliberately not taken it. You can see that in the paintings themselves. If you look here at the section that looks like a toothy grin in 'Exotic Dancer', you'll see some charcoal lines where I had drawn in the image but painted it slightly differently. Those charcoal lines you would imagine were drawn in early on in the painting. However they add something to the image so I've left them in. Of course charcoal is quite fragile; by accident they might

be rubbed away, that's a danger.

*Could they have the effect of destroying the painting?*

No, not at all. There are often instances, like in that painting (*Origami Aviator*) where I came back and redrew those charcoal marks with black paint, to make them permanent. It was important for me to have that shifting provisional sense made permanent at that point in the picture. I trust to effects in a way.

*So do I take it that you like to keep an open, breathing kind of quality through the paintings? Perhaps it doesn't work when it fixes too quickly?*

Absolutely, in '*Origami Aviator*', there is a mark which has dripped. There is no way I would have intentionally set out to do that, but the fact that it happened, seemed to me to indicate something of the speed and transience; not just of the image, but the nature of

the making. I felt it added something to the painting, you read chance in it, rather than deliberation. I find the speed with which the paintings are read is a very crucial thing.

I like it when you get that first hit of an image straight away. As you try to interpret it you find yourself in a much more uncertain area; it falls apart, then it coalesces - it falls apart and gells into something else. At some level you understand this is an image of a head, for instance, but if you try to reconstruct it logically, to make sense of it, it falls apart.

*I want to hang in with the portrait aspect of this painting; there's a very particular tension in which it's held, the suggestion of the eyes and mouth, there's an immediacy in the way it's done. There's an energy, an assertiveness about it. Do you try to keep that through the paintings?*

It varies. I like the sense of speed, sometimes it's only a pretence of speed. It's an

acknowledgement of speed rather than real speed. In fact the painting can take an awful long time to make. The basic image is established and then I constantly work around it, take things out, layer the paint. This one only began to work for me with the density of the brown, which slowed something down in the painting.

*Brown has very curious qualities.* It does, I tend not to use it. It gave a slow weight to that moment in the painting. It somehow allowed the rest of the speediness, the immediacy of the painting to get put in context.

*Perhaps the confrontation of the face, the teeth become like a ladder.* This is probably a fantasy on my part, that paintings have a character, in that they're very self aware. They carry a consciousness about themselves. That's when they start to work. This painting is called 'Half a Smiling Onion', it has a portrait-like



Ansel Krut **Exotic Dancer** 2009,  
oil on canvas 150x120 cm, 59.1x47.2 ins  
Courtesy Stuart Shave/Modern Art

quality in terms of the scale. It has a smile, is there a slight malevolence to it? It has a little burst of light - a gold tooth?

*Which becomes very intense, almost like a little sun.*

It is, it's something else that changes the pace and reading of the picture. It might be a piece of cress, something slightly anti-social. It adds something to the quality of the onion head. I think it's funny, having that detail suggested possibilities.

*Do you ever compare what you do with canons of modernism and contemporary art? Or do you exclude it and just deal with the painting, or both?*

Both, simultaneously, why do you mention that?

*It was in the back of my mind to ask, because of the general character of the paintings? Perhaps to find where it stands in relation to other works.*

People ask me that all the time. They delve into history. They ask, are these layers of referenc-

ing ironic? But I think it is more to do with the formalities of language, the artificiality of language. I like paintings, I look at paintings a lot. I think there's a kind of language of painting which all painters engage with in some way.

*So they're not reacting to the modernist pantheon, anyway the word irony is a troubling one.*

It is. Actually I try to make honest paintings. I like to make my paintings as discreet objects in themselves, not as reactions to other paintings, or to provoke an imagined viewer, but I don't think I can preclude myself from the general swim of painting language, or the impact an image will have. Other people do read into them though, they bring their own preoccupations to the image.

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