

## Sanya Kantarovsky

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The paintings of Russian-born, LA-based artist Sanya Kantarovsky are almost irresistibly appealing, even adorable. Modestly scaled mergers of abstract and figurative—or, more to the point, painterly and illustrational—elements, they are executed with a confident ease, a lightness of touch that suggests not just rigor and control but a self-pleasuring frivolity, too. In these works, the paint is often thinly applied and, here and there, wiped or scraped away, leaving voids veiled with the barely there traces of facture, lines and layered color over which the artist has rendered a pictorial mise-en-scène. The sinewy figures that inhabit the schematic architecture of Kantarovsky's pictorial space are shown engaged in various creative pursuits. In their moody isolation, these characters conform to clichés of the suffering artist, with only the evacuated shapes of their arch stylization keeping them from being instantly legible.

For example, in *Sinfonia #2* (all works cited, 2012), an orchestra conductor is depicted from the rear, caught in a moment of ecstatic

musical transport, with arms outstretched and neck sharply bent, his head peering out from under one arm and his eyes wide open in shock as he suddenly registers an audience. In *Events*, a woman kneels doubled over on the floor, one hand over her head and the other clutching an empty page in front of her, lost to the world. One is tempted to read these characters as figures of fun and, to an extent, they are. On this point, Kantarovsky cites the work of the Danish political cartoonist Herluf Bidstrup, whose satirical swipes at modern art as the ultimate (and quintessentially bourgeois) expression of inwardness overcultivated to the point of absurdity are a crucial source of inspiration. For American viewers, a related sensibility might be found in back issues of the *New Yorker*, though that reference could by no means stand in as a direct equivalent—and it is precisely the



Sanya Kantarovsky,  
*The Man with the  
Black Coat*, 2012, oil  
and watercolor on  
linen, 34 x 26".

bilious subtext of such geopolitically disparate allusions that clouds the outwardly easy good humor of these works.

The show's title, "Blue Notebook N° 10," is taken from a 1937 poem by Daniil Kharms, a little-known casualty (at least on these shores) of Stalin's cultural purges. Kharms, who influenced all the works in this show, explicitly appears in *The Man with the Black Coat*, a painting featuring the side view of a figure, from about the elbows down, attired in blue pajamas, and identifiable as Kharms's only by the Monsieur Hulot-like pipe that slips tellingly from his fingers as a facing pair of black-booted men close in on him. Authoritarian book-ends, they proclaim the last word on a literary career. In *Today I Wrote Nothing*, one of three large welded steel sculptures that graced the center of the gallery, another male figure (Kharms, or another like him) appears at the base of an upwardly arcing line that connects to the hinged shapes of a triangle and an oval—all the better, perhaps, to allow the viewer to contemplate the abstract link between writing and drawing, picto- and -graph.

The empty pages that float through so many of Kantarovsky's paintings reappear amid the smoothly tracked glacial landscape of a video piece, *Before 16 and Older*, which was screened in the rear gallery. At once a nod to the reductive endgames of Mallarmé and Malevich and to the politics of censorship, it invites us to ponder the play between creative self-suppression and that exercised by the state. In Kantarovsky's work, this is not just a matter of historical interest; hiding within all that absence are warnings, written in invisible ink, that we have still yet to decode.

—Jan Tumlir