

Touching on the Soviet
avant-garde, children's book
illustrations, and Kafka's
sub-archetypal funniness,
Joanna Fiduccia
analyzes
how

SANYA
KANTAROVSKY's
virtuosic paintings
liberate the memories and
intensities suppressed
by the dominant conversations
about painting today.

Sanya Kantarovsky, *Untitled*, 2010



Biography

SANYA KANTAROVSKY (b. 1982, Moscow) lives and works in Los Angeles. He has participated in group exhibitions at Wallspace, New York; Marc Foxx, Los Angeles; Honor Fraser, Los Angeles; Clifton Benevento, New York; Allan Nedderpelt, Brooklyn; New Museum, New York; and Howard House of Contemporary Art, Seattle. He won the Program Artist in Residency, Berlin in 2007.

Current & Forthcoming

SANYA KANTAROVSKY is currently having a solo show, titled "Blue Notebook N°10," at Marc Foxx, Los Angeles, through March 24.

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HIGHLIGHTS

There he stands in the spotlight, the conductor: arms magisterially extended, coat-tails flutter, sheet music in wild flight around him, flung in a musical paroxysm. But his apparent ecstasy is belied by his face, which is crooked under his arm, peering behind him as if to ask: Was it to your liking? Or, with still greater apprehension, sensing only a wall of silence at his back: Are you still *there*? The painting is a talisman for its maker, Russian-born and Los Angeles-based artist Sanya Kantarovsky—a confession of insecurity, all the more disarming for being less callow than it first appears. For Kantarovsky's paintings don't bear traces of performance anxiety; puffed with self-aware virtuosity, they are executed with an illustrator's ease and in the consistent palette of an artist beyond his years. They do, however, crave a certain unworldly engagement that makes them outsiders, sensitive conductors of the memories that encode our lives, with their abashments of beauty and pathos.

Here is how the painter does not like to hear his work described: as "abstract paintings with figurative elements" or "figuration merged with abstraction." I suspect he's bothered by the blithe indifference of these statements, and their endorsement of a delusion in contemporary painting that renders up all histories as so many motifs without nation, without past, without humanity. Such descriptions are also, perhaps, too overly confident in their ability to parse the abstract from the figurative in the first place.

Kantarovsky's figurative elements belong to a graphic repertoire of solid black shoes, calligraphic hands and lithesome bodies that recall the dark fancy of Walter Trier's drawings, the scrappy expressiveness of Russian child prodigy Nadya Rush-eva's illustrations of *Master and Margarita*, or Jacques Tati's *Playtime* city dwellers, who are more signs than men. A mannered, cartoonish zigzag—the artist's short-hand shadow—shows up everywhere, even appearing as the ironic underpainting of a labored abstract passage. That passage, moreover, is only dubiously abstract: why not see in it depictions of Brutalist cells or denuded vistas *à la* Léon Spillaert? Other "abstract" grounds metamorphose into familiar signs of abstraction itself: A figure in an overcoat and fedora looks up at a scumbled gray and blue sky, divided by the circles and diagonals of an El Lissitzkian barnacle of modernist public sculpture. The dusky margins of another canvas open like curtains on a man silhouetted against a doorway bounded by a neoplastic column and a runner. The man, who appears at first to be bowing, might in fact be merely stooping to gather up a sheet of paper at his feet, a gesture that suggests that the whole theater of painterly performance may be but a decoy for the fumbling that actually makes up much of the creative process.

Kantarovsky's subjects gaze out windows, clutching their hair; they slump over desks, read books and look at art, moving through familiar postures of the creative class (or more particularly, the artist)—and some less familiar, as in one small painting, where we see a pair of legs rising on tiptoe atop a small table as though they were about to float into space, or kick the table out from under them. Kantarovsky has more than rhetorical interest in this strategy of sinister *double entendre*. For the Soviet avant-garde, it was the only means for survival; both dissidence and high abstraction had to be smuggled through allegory or carried out in code. Often this occurred in children's books or illustrations, where a few extra marks sufficed to dissemble a constructivist composition in a cartoon. Kantarovsky, who left Russia with his family after the coup at the age of 10, was reared on these works and their legacies, alongside the clandestine persistence of culture in his grandparents' samizdat library, and they remain personal and aesthetic touchstones. Facile descriptions of

Sanya Kantarovsky, *Untitled*, 2011

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TANYA LEIGHTON



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Kantarovsky's work fail most dramatically here, where the so-called binary of high and low culture, or abstract painting and figurative illustration, obliterate the role that popular culture played in the coded persistence of the Soviet avant-garde.

These methods proved literarily and artistically potent but, tragically, lethal for some of their practitioners, including the absurdist Futurist writer Daniil Kharms, whose prose-poem "Blue Notebook No. 10" provided the title for Kantarovsky's first solo exhibition at Marc Foxx Gallery in Los Angeles. The poem begins with the description of a "red-haired man who had no eyes and no ears," from whom Kharms successively withdraws mouth, arms, legs and finally viscera, rubbing out the figure he'd just written into existence. The nine-line story is a droll tribute to false starts, however grimly resonant with the Stalinist purges. (Kharms himself was arrested in 1941 and died less than five months later in a Leningrad prison, likely of starvation.) We have words for these tales — gallows humor, dark comedy — and ways of anatomizing their old-world sensibility: no slapstick, no body functions, no intertextual wit, but only what David Foster Wallace describes, in his essay "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness From Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed," as the "sub-archetypal, the primordial little-kid stuff from which myths derive."

Kafka's funniness is radically literal, the idiomatic expression made real: the Hunger Artist starved for affection, Kantarovsky's artist hitting a wall of abstraction. And yet as Foster Wallace stresses, Kafka's stories are not jokes. Their punch lines don't arrive to reassure us; instead, they tender truths so dark and absurd that one *must* laugh. Kafka writes with the joke's economy, just as Kantarovsky paints with the cartoon's, but not in the name of a satisfying discharge. In their 1975 *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari describe this economy as a "willed poverty," an aspect of its force as a minor literature. A minor literature, they explain, is not marginal; it irrupts *within* the official narrative, denuding and disorienting it, working over its sober intensities from the inside. Thus Kafka doesn't write in Czech, but in Prague German; he makes minor use of a major language to counter its oppressions, to locate the breaches through which language can escape itself.

This is what I see Kantarovsky's paintings doing as well: liberating the memories and intensities suppressed by the dominant conversation around painting today. To wit: Painting as a tool, a pretext, a negotiation with its history and theory; painting that questions its roots or probes its endgame; "provisional painting" (Raphael Rubenstein) or painting expanded. These conversations are neither new nor small-minded, and I list them here only to consolidate their exclusions: for with painting occupied with being its own probe and critical biography, what is left to the viewer but to be Leo Steinberg's "man in a hurry," bustling through the channels of art history and theory — and imagining that all channels lie open to his analysis?

Kantarovsky's painting disrupts this dilettantish fiction from the inside. It creates moments of partisanship with personal and political pasts that do not or cannot lie open to the crowd. In doing so, it exposes the paradox of that ostensive openness, which results not in the intensification of history and theory but in total indifference to them. There is no room for indifference for those who attend to the histories Kantarovsky evokes, no space for the chilly cant of contemporary painting, despite their ability to speak its language. Malevich once gave Kharms a copy of his book *God Is Not Dead*, inscribed with the following message: "Go and put a stop to progress!" What better way than by storming an amnesiac present with the symphony of human memory?

All images courtesy of the artist and
Marc Foxx, Los Angeles

Sanya Kantarovsky, *The Third Library*, 2012

Sanya Kantarovsky, *Sinfonia #2*, 2012

Sanya Kantarovsky, *Natoua*, 2011

