

Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM), Põhja pst 35, Tallinn

Alice Kask



Title : Alice Kask, installation view at Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia, 2016

ALICE KASK

Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn

16 June - 24 July 2016

Review by John Gayer

The self-titled survey of Alice Kask's paintings on show at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM) presents a succinct and visually fascinating account of the artist's career. The paintings date from her last years as a student at the Estonian Academy of Arts in the late 1990s to entirely new work produced just this year. Mounted following a loosely chronological order and without supplementary contextual information, the exhibition clearly leaves it up to the viewer to examine its content and decide what the work conveys. Moreover, most of the works in the show are 'Untitled' and this terminates another path that could potentially help elucidate what it is that she is doing. Though the compendium highlights select recurring motifs and fleshes out an evolution in style and technique, the task of uncovering the crux of her work remains a difficult task.

To put it simply, Kask paints the human figure, figures that are almost always male. It is something at which she thoroughly excels. Her figures are often isolated. She also places them in indistinct settings. We find them situated in confining spaces that determine their scale and pose, or interiors that, much like Francis Bacon's canvases, show only a single line to indicate where the wall and floor meet. Natural settings are also occasionally employed and feature in two compositions that also nod towards surrealism, for the way the vertically oriented figures float in front of or over various horizontal details. Many of the beings in these works are fragmented, unfinished, posed with their backs facing the viewer and/or have key features hidden by blurs of movement.

The earliest works are the murkiest. Dashed off on some of the roughest scraps of plywood, these irregularly shaped supports are warped, broken along their edges and, in some cases, so degraded that the surface had begun to peel apart before Kask applied her gloomy colours. In subsequent works the palette becomes lighter and broadens slightly to include greyish blues and purples, and brief touches of red. Kask also begins to depict her subjects in a much more realistic manner and flesh tones assume a high degree of importance, especially since she becomes much more preoccupied with delineating the physical structure and gestural capability of limbs. Muscular clasped hands, for example, evince psychological states or help those in need of physical assistance. In certain respects these expressions of agony, steely determination and cooperation recall Leon Golub's interest in hand gestures, but the restraint, precision and emotional intensity that mark Kask's depictions contradict the theatricality and scale of his much more brutal representations.

Performativity, spatial qualities and the figure's relationship to its own shadow form other tangents through which Kask develops her artistic vocabulary. In one painting a series of silhouettes fill the space between the figure and its shadow that has fallen on the ground. This attempt at actualizing the immaterial, also references stop motion animation. In another work, wherein the twisting subject supports his body by putting his head against the wall, the figure and its shadow link to form a continuous circuit triangular in shape. This latter image is also very sculptural in the way that it delineates space. In fact, the character of some of the images included in a career-spanning wall full of drawings and a display case holding dozens of minuscule recent sketches suggest that Kask could just as easily be planning sculptures or performance pieces.

Then, just to add another level to what is already a richly complex show, a handful of non-figurative images punctuate the progression. Ranging from a sumptuous grid painting/assemblage to the gloriously crumpled surfaces of a trash bag, on one canvas, and scrap of paper, in another, their manifestation is as compelling visually as the figurative works.

In many ways the products of Kask's studio raise more questions, than answers, and yet there is something about the content of her work – however oblique the sentiments or perspectives expressed – that aligns its multiple facets and holds them together. One can make conjectures as to her sources, be it dreams, her skill at observing incidental patterns or behaviour, or an interest in depicting physical feats, that produces only one result: Her images are so intriguing, it is difficult to stop looking and thinking about them.

Published on 28 July 2016



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