



# Geometries of

Essay by  
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# Depersonalisation

"Art Class" (2019) is a pencil drawing of a life drawing class. Seemingly a leisure activity taking place at a nudist colony, all the figures depicted, artists and model, are naked and appear comfortable in their nakedness. The figures are arranged in a semi-circle around the model with their backs to the viewer: the model's is the only face fully available to us. The draughtspersons each hold a stack of papers on which small drawings of the model starts to take shape. Behind the model, a picnic table and a pleasant forest clearing are visible. The scene might have been a contemporary take on the classic trope of painting where the act of painting itself or the environment in which it takes place (the studio) are represented. Rembrandt's "The Artist in his Studio" (1626) is perhaps the best-known example, with its playful negation of the gaze (the easel seen from the back, refusing to reveal to the viewer whether the painted canvas is a miniature fractal version of itself). The triangular optics established in the painting, between the viewer and the depiction of the artist and the model, are echoed in "Art Class".

But "Art Class" pivots away from such canonical readings. The work is drawn in pencil on rosin paper, its pinkish surface rubbed raw so that the underlying wooden board mottles the image. Conventionally an industrial underflooring material, the disintegrating paper obstructs the gaze and destroys the illusory unity of the picture. Because the image seems faded, the overall effect is of a washed-out pornographic image, its degraded façade rendering the gaze uninvited, trying to peer under these blockages at the naked bodies. Yet this is no schlock postcard from the 1970s. The face staring at us perched on top of the naked female body of the model is a square male cartoon whose grinning expression is as unrevealing as the paper blotches, the sexual suggestiveness of the image negated in its psychological flatness. The games of surface, concealment and framing do not lead to the disclosure of a psychological inner world. There is no deeper interiority here, no dialectical opening up of the subject to the world - the face, hardly a mirror to the soul, is a flat sign placed on top of the image just like the dusty rose bits of papers.



Art class, 2019, pencil, rosinpaper on board, 26 x 20 inch

The relationship between subjective and objective space that has been vacated by "Art Class" was centre stage in Modernist painting. Fredric Jameson describes this as the powerful paradox that he finds in Edvard Munch. On the one hand, Munch's canvases participate in the ideological production of the bourgeois subject, a "monad-like container, within which things are felt which are then expressed by projection outwards". Modern painting does more than illustrate this cage in which subjective expression is trapped, it is in itself and through its own intrinsic qualities a device that delimits the world and centres it on a subjective and isolated point of view. On the other hand, argues Jameson, in Munch's painting, this process of subjectivisation is not a happy one. The paintings clearly depict the price paid for this entrapment: they are images of being "buried alive and condemned to a prison-cell without egress". Writing in 1984, Jameson predicted a postmodern end to this dilemma. New painting, he writes, exhibits a 'waning of affect' that delinks it from subjective modes of being (and also from the unique artistic style of the individual artist), dispersing expression into the background as a generalised, "free floating and impersonal" source of anxiety.<sup>1</sup>

1 Jameson, Frederic, "in: Art in Theory: 1900-1990 [Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul - eds.], p. 1080

In many of Kasper Kovitz's works, like "Art Class", the painting is no longer a neutral ground, an object that simply mediates between the artist and the viewer. There is no longer a suggestion here of an inferred interiority, either of the artist or of other complete and believable worlds, into which the viewer might peer. Instead, the paintings themselves, made of rectangles of wood, rough packaging paper, cheap board, sand paper and sometimes canvas, stand as hostile objects that perform acts of resistance and disrupt the smooth vectors of reflection from the disembodied painter to the spectator. The paintings' materiality also resists the artist's touch, making application painfully hard, as if refusing to submit and become an image, conspiring against the artist. Working with unconventional substances - fox's urine, bear scat, jam, gummy bears, pine sap or Turkish coffee - introduces another stratum of narrative.



Foxes, 2008, fox urine, 9 1/2 x 12 x 3/8 inch

The urine is so thin that the painter must apply layer after layer in order to bring out a mark at all, the sap and jam clog the surface to destroy any illusory depth. The coffee leaves pale diluted marks that betray grand historical themes like a hotel in San Remo where Sykes and Picot carved the middle east between the British and French at the end of WW1. The coffee, symbol of the crumbling Ottoman Empire, has the last laugh. Kovitz often conjures art historical tropes such as landscape, history, religious painting or even the 'artist at work', but instead of reinforcing their canonical status as 'important art', they are dragged back to earth by the stubborn toxicity of their material connection to everyday environments.

The material surface of the paintings also interferes with the possibility of viewing, blotting the images with obstructive smudges, leaving a residue of dirt or covering the image with geometric lines that sit on top of landscapes and figures. These surfaces literally trap fragments of narrative, of psychological 'depth', histories and symbols in these gritty rectangles of chipboard. Everywhere around us visual information flows quickly and smoothly from mobile phones, LED billboards and surveillance satellites. But Kovitz's works force this flow of imagery into a contained stillness. The image is frozen, but the frame is granted an active agency.



Rate Your Progress [Schoharie County, NY], 2010, motif and demolition installation at ISCP, NYC, 25 x 10 x 12 feet

In "Rate Your Progress" (2009), it becomes an architectural feature that dominates the space and holds together the fragments of a represented landscape, forcing us to acknowledge the blitzed vegetation ravaged by war. In the "Aspirational Combine" series (2017-2024), a virginal landscape is framed by thick geomatic lines that etch a simple architectural bracket on the surface of the painting.



Aspirational Combine II, 2023, oil, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 70 inch

In "Where is Everybody" (2019), it is a forest of straight lines forming pillars and rows and rows of office cubical that frame human space itself. This office space, quiet and abandoned, is like a container for human life, parcelled neatly into cage-like square blocks.

What these intersecting lines make clear is that perceiving is never merely describing. Painting is also imposing a mental image onto the world. The canonical story of art tells us that the Renaissance introduced perspective, supplanting the stiff placement of religious figures on the picture plane with the 'conquest of reality', as Ernst Gombrich famously put it. This geometrically overdetermined spatial device was subsequently challenged by a series of vanguard interventions that noted the ways in which time might intervene in such a stable view of the world, from impressionism to cubism, culminating in the apotheosis of modernism in the realisation that the surface of the painting is itself a site with its own spatial determinations. Of course we can protest that this is only the Western story of art: in China, for example, this idea of perspective as something that centres vision on the human eye to which all lines converge was mocked as a childish misunderstanding of a world that far exceeded individual perception.<sup>2</sup> But underlying this particular story about art history is an assumption that we gradually move towards greater clarity, each new twist in the story of art producing not just new ways of seeing, but ways of seeing better.

By contrast, in Kovitz's perspectival projections, depth does not produce greater clarity, just more stories. These fabulations unravel the stories we tell ourselves about empty spaces lying vacant, waiting for us to fill them with our physical and mental architectures. Where figures do inhabit these spaces, they are invariably depicted wearing the same square-jawed face. Originally taken from standard police shooting range target, this ubiquitous head, known as Litmus, is an act of sabotage that destroys any claim for intimacy in the painting. Slipping out of the paintings, serving as placeholders for viewers, Litmus heads even inhabit the gallery and face the paintings in an exhibition fittingly titled "Educational Devices" (Denk Gallery, Los Angeles, 2018).

2 As Massimo Scolari writes, "[...] the attempt to institute a single viewpoint contradicted the very roots of Chinese thought, in which man is not the measure of all things. Rather, according to the Taoist conception, it is nature that expresses itself through the artist. And if it was accepted that perspectival representation was closer in appearance to vision, as early as the ninth century Sou Che had written: "He who judges painting according to the concept of resemblance shows the understanding of a child". Scolari, Massimo, *Oblique Drawing: A History of Anti-Perspective* [Jenny Condie Palandri - ed.], Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015, p. 348



Educational Devices at Denk Gallery, Los Angeles, 2018.

They tell us to look again and direct our gaze from any figures or architectures to the frame. This educational function is key to much of Kovitz's work. Given painting's role as an optical device, framing the world and telling us how to see it, figures have often taken up the place of the viewer in the course of art history. We can think of Casper David Friedrich's "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog" as an instructional tutorial in how to contemplate nature, for example. But here the lesson is not to absorb a particular way of seeing the world, but to become aware that one is being taught to do so. This far more radical pedagogy is most explicitly addressed in a series called "The Lessons", where Kovitz sets himself the task of visualising specific abstract concepts by assuming the role of 35 fictitious students. Starting from their assignment worksheets, the paintings proceed as absurd bureaucratic exercises, imposing a rigid system that would appear to suppress any spontaneous self-expression. Yet from these standardised strictures, we are led to question the way in which a self is formed to begin with.

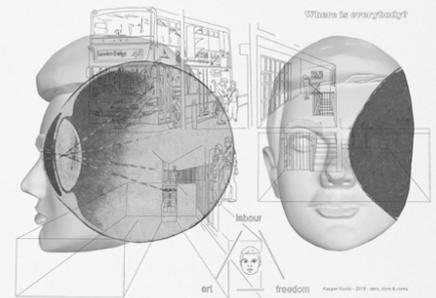
Writing about the recent return of painting to figuration, Larne Abse Gogarty describes artists such as TM Davy, Louis Fratino and Doron Langberg as belonging to a school of 'queer figuration' that celebrates the depiction of historically under-represented identities as a political achievement. She finds in this political justification a sterile liberal humanism that does little to redress the causes of marginalisation. We could go further by suggesting that the recent resurgence of affect and figuration in painting does not signal a return to Munch's dilemma. Jameson understands modernist painting as a representation of the self as it comes into being through the trauma of severance from the collective. But today the demand for a dis-alienated collectivity has been replaced with a discourse of self-care that preserves the damaged subject and even enhances it as 'human capital' to be traded off through economies of attention. Despite the historical and current social exclusion of queer subjects, much contemporary figurative painting asks to make the viewer recognise that "the people in that painting look like me and do what I do" or are capable of pleasure and joy.<sup>3</sup> Readily absorbed into the art market, these artworks end up erasing the real political

Gogarty, Larne Abse, "Figuring Figuration", in: Art Monthly, no. 465, April, 2023, p. 8

management of social and economic difference under a sweeping banner of subjective sameness.

The appearance of Litmus in Kovitz's work has the opposite effect. Kovitz forces a kind of formal sameness on his subjects, who all wear the same face. But this sameness is a form of violence, not a benign form of liberal solidarity: the social difference between figures is very present – they are middle-ages nudists, nuns, art professors or just passengers on a London bus – but they are all forced to coexist under this banal mask of pleasant inexpressiveness.

Litmus is the ultimate late capitalist subject in a world where a modicum of difference is tolerated and even produced by a totality that reduces all forms of self-expression into capital. At the same time, under his mocking gaze, a new kind of difference seeps through the cracks. It's hard to imagine any kind of optimism lying beneath the frequently grimy surfaces of Kovitz' paintings, especially in light of his proposals for a human free zone or a monument that is also a kind of prepper bunker. But unlike the clean images that form the source material for many of the paintings, his use of rough supports and unyielding substances prevents his work from being subsumed back into the flatness of the screen. Organic, random marks mar the neat lines, obscuring the edifices they construct and the illustrated stock figures that inhabit them. Even when the assignment is the same, the contingency of materials guarantees the production of difference from which the new might yet be born.



Exhibition poster: Where is Everybody? At xero, kline & coma, London, 2019.