David Surman
Sirens

13 September - 26 October 2019

After the Age of Innocence

> Just as the painter touches his painting, so, it may be imagined, does the painting touch him. The fundamentally reciprocal dimension of touch encourages us to consider the painting itself as the agent of the process, and to imagine how this interactive object *behaves* rather than merely what it looks like.
>
> **Ewa Lajer-Burcharth**

There are works on canvas, both large and small. … In these, the colours are unapologetically raw and pure, but never lurid or ugly. In fact, their intensity is surprisingly muted. There is no traditional modelling or finessing of volumes, either, only blocky shapes composed of rough-hewn fragments that exist – somewhat precariously – in a nervous, but nevertheless entirely stable, tension. Contours are sometimes hard and sharp. At other times, they are ragged or fuzzy. Forms are little more than rapidly scrawled hieroglyphics, crude signifiers in a language spoken only by this work, here and now. There are dribbles and spatters, blobs and flecks, as well as twitchy ribbons and wobbly slivers of molten paint. And, as if that were not enough, all manner of silky veneers and wispy veils. A crow bursts forth from a fistful of splintery feathers. A puppy sheepishly emerges from the union of several otherwise nondescript pools of solid pigment. A pair of warring cats arise from a welter of sinewy streaks that evoke bolts of lightning.

There are works on paper, too. … In these, we find dots and dashes of every kind, as well as lines that refuse to fully enclose figures and lines that gingerly garnish them with texture. Everything vibrates or pulsates, wriggles or jiggles. Volumes are implied, but reluctantly, and incompletely, such that flesh turns fiery and skin turns airy. Bodies hum and crackle with a delirious energy as they invade, and are invaded by, the space around them. Every graphic signifier in this metamorphic cosmos is either a spark or a flame, a breeze or a gust. This is an intoxicatingly elemental bestiary.

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Over the past year or so, Surman's work has undergone an electrifying transformation. It has become braver, and bolder, in every respect Animals, which previously made only sporadic appearances in his oeuvre, recently become his principle subject, encouraging him to explore their representational possibilities more broadly and, in turn, more deeply. At the same time, his gestural style has acquired a sketchier muscularity and a cheekier high-spiritedness – without, it must be stressed, any loss of pictorial exactitude or emotional delicacy. On the contrary, this new, strikingly exuberant carnality of touch is tempered by a technical elegance and expressive tenderness that reflect his ample, unforced sensitivity as both an artist and a person. Likewise, the material intelligence on display in this latest volley of work is testament to his wide-ranging erudition and unstinting reflexiveness, which

everywhere underpin, but nowhere dominate or overwhelm, his images. The upshot of these developments is a profusion of marvellously varied surfaces that are not only more *animated*, but also more *animate* than before. To those aware of Surman's past endeavours as an animator, as well as his abiding compassion for animals, none of this will come as a surprise. Indeed, it will no doubt be understood as the ecstatic culmination of an often-gruelling quest in search of a "knowing" sincerity.

What is truly remarkable, though, is how Surman arranges for the *process* of this seeking to remain vividly inscribed in the surfaces of his paintings, drawings and prints. In part, he achieves this by working so quickly, and so decisively, that the freshness and liveliness of his initial marks cannot possibly be weakened, muddied or erased by second thoughts and corrections. Speed, however, is just one factor in the equation. He also relies on being able to spontaneously, and definitively, synthesise a range of conceptual and sensorial impulses without – and this is the hard part – ever allowing one tendency to override the other. As ideas and instincts converge and collide, surfaces wracked and scarred by conflicting discourses begin to congeal and settle. This violence and its echoes is, of course, profoundly joyful – and, I think, very beautiful.

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In her book *The Painter's Touch: Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard* (2018), Ewa Lajer-Burcharth pinpoints an identical set of objectives and manoeuvres in relation to artists of the French Rococo: who, she argues, considered individuality 'not as a "natural" effect of artistic talent but as a self-aware pursuit manifest in specific pictorial strategies and modes of operation.' Perhaps this is why, in Surman's seething menagerie, no animal can be still – or, for that matter, stilled. As his brothers and sisters in arms, they refract his own desire to avoid being forever fixed, either in life or in art. Indeed, for him, this is the essence of creaturely – and creative – vitality: to remain fluid … and mobile.

Interestingly, Surman cites Théodore Géricault and Francisco Goya, artists for whom Romanticism provided even greater opportunities to expand on the eighteenth century's presciently modern 'embrace of materiality' and flamboyant obsession with "deep" surfaces. Drawing on these (and other) historical points of reference, Surman's thoroughly contemporary practice also exhibits a 'tactile involvement' – or 'corporeal engagement' – with surfaces, which are treated as fluid zones of encounter, where history and the present, knowledge and instinct, truth and doubt, animal and human can freely intersect, intermingle and interact. In this sense, his artistic authenticity resides not so much in his gestural "simplicity", but in his acknowledgement of just how impossible it is to be *innocently* simple with respect to one's gestural stratagems.

Lucio Crispino (2019)

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