

The Childhood of Art

What is the common point between paintings of a sheep, a young woman dancing among empty bottles in a Parisian apartment, a landscape at dusk, two people having sex, a self-portrait, a group of tourists listening to a guide drowned in the crowd in front of Courbet's *Le Sommeil*, a street corner with tags, trees losing their leaves and an empty phone booth, an old lady dying on a hospital bed disfigured by an oxygen mask, and a shelf bearing a random collection of condiments (oil and vinegar bottles, salt, pepper, Nescafé, sugar, a yellow Ikea glass full of knives and forks)?



Their first common point, certainly the easiest to find, is that each of Thomas Lévy-Lasne's paintings or drawings depicts swathe of reality seemingly without deforming it, as though it had to be accounted for just as it is. Thomas Lévy-Lasne explains that his point is to give reality a form of presence by showing snapshots of it. But is giving reality a form of presence a way of hinting that even though it surrounds us, it is absent?

Why start by taking pictures of things in order to reconstruct them through painting slowly, carefully, meticulously, in their minutest details and patterns? Repainting photographs to halt time, to immortalize, sacralize the anecdotal? Perhaps, but also to remind us that reality is already there, and that though the meaning or function we ascribe to it may vary according to different countries, fashions, cultures, religions and eras, there's no reason to ignore it or forget it even when it seems insignificant, trifling, in short uninteresting. Deep down, there's nothing spectacular about death, sex or parties. Far from being events, they are commonplace and must therefore be treated on the same level as a shelf. They exist no more and no less. They are ordinary, timeless, universal, and that is their merit.

But though it shares several features with realism (crude situations, an interest for daily life, a sense of detail, a preference for the descriptive), Thomas Lévy-Lasne's painting doesn't endeavor to depict reality as it is. Its perspective is not documentary; its purpose is not to bequeath to future generations the pictorial equivalent of explanatory, objective articles.

Hence the second common point between his works, this time more diachronic than synchronic. Each painting, each watercolor can be classified under the major genres of art history: portrait, hunting scene, nude, landscape, still life... From this standpoint, is there an element of nostalgia in his way of painting and drawing? Certainly not. Not only because Thomas Lévy-Lasne paints today's world in its most contemporary aspects (with its unavoidable computers and cell phones, its unavoidable parties or couples falling apart); not only because he wants to give presence to (to remind us of) today's world, but also because each of his drawings, each of his paintings is driven by a question that revives and founds, perhaps, the desire to paint: that of the gaze. Which is their third common point.

In most of Lévy-Lasne's paintings or drawings, we don't know who is looking at whom, or rather who doesn't want to be looked at. The figures seldom stare at the painter, except animals and children, as though even in his portraits it is a stolen moment, a hitch or a glitch that Lévy-Lasne has managed to capture and steal.

A dazed expression, a blank or frozen gaze; what is shown is something that shouldn't be represented, shouldn't be displayed, isn't posed: an embarrassed woman exposing her naked body as though the painter were not about to reduce her to pictorial matter but to give her a shot; moments of weakness; dancing partiers' faces cropped off so that they look like headless ducks still twitching around; bodies sucking or licking each other, faces are hidden by hair or averted.

What's left of a body when it no longer has a face, of a face when it no longer has a gaze? More than presence, what's left is matter, painted matter that attests to skin, hair, texture, matter that reproduces moments when a face goes slack, void, withdraws, betrays more than it offers itself, and bears witness to its everlasting humanity.

We know that executioners often hide the head of the condemned before putting them to death. The painter as torturer is not forcing reality to speak, but compelling viewers to see something they almost never pay attention to. As Flaubert said, if you look at something long enough, you'll make it interesting.

Let's say we are no longer interested in reality, that we no longer take the time to observe it. This means we could only be made aware of it through painting. The empty phone booth, a relic of recent times when cell phones didn't exist, still stands there, useless; the awkwardness of the model exposing her nakedness was there too, it existed. It should have been concealed; priority should have been given to pose. But Thomas Lévy-Lasne's painting contests and refuses posing or posturing.

Bereft of its traditional function, no longer displaying itself, as though caught unawares, the embarrassed nude becomes mute. It no longer has a story to tell, though we well know that the easiest way of making it interesting would be to turn it into a fictional character. What's so disconcerting about Thomas Lévy-Lasne's canvases and drawings is that they foil every plot, rendering the very notion of plot obsolete. In one of his pictures, a young woman is staring at her phone. She is in a bar, and at the end of the bar, people are dancing. In the crowd, we see a giant. He is standing still and we can imagine he'll try to come on to her; we can start telling ourselves a story and identifying with the characters. That is, we could if these two were looking at each other.

They don't. As a result, the painting acts like a trap. We can't help ascribing intentions to the figures. But in the end, and that's probably what's most unbearable, we must admit that nothing is happening. No smile, no understanding between the giant and the young woman. Definitely nothing but painting. It is in this sense there is something unique in Thomas Lévy-Lasne's work. His snapshots, whether of the head of a cow, a child, a blow job, a scene in a museum, induce us to find meaning, to know more. But there is no meaning, and Lévy-Lasne's quasi-obsessive attention to details cancels and thwarts any attempt at interpretation. All that's left, beyond swathes of represented reality, is the revisiting and affirmation of the history of painting, and a confirmation of its superiority over photography to capture, reconstruct and embody reality. Art history brought to light and updated. In the past, you had mandolins, grape vines, chessboards or decks of cards; today, other motifs are called for: pornography, the virtualization of human relationships, the disappearance of animals (which Thomas Lévy-Lasne paints as though they were already extinct, stuffed and in museums).

One of Thomas Lévy-Lasne's latest paintings might sum up the above. A naked woman is lying in bed. Unlike the *Maja Desnuda*, she is turning her back to the viewer to stare at her Facebook page on the screen of her laptop. Like a Caravaggio, she has dirty feet. She is lying on a bed sheet depicted with a technique reminiscent of mannerism. Behind her, two gray walls act as monochromes, but their nuances, from dark to pale grey, also conjure the passage of time as conceived by Opalka, or a painting by Richter.

By multiplying allusions to art history and combining them on the same canvas, Lévy-Lasne suggests that what is always already here is not reality. In the end, throughout human history, ever since Lascaux, it has been painting.

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