

A BRUSH WITH THE REAL

FIGURATIVE PAINTING TODAY

Marc Valli & Margherita Dessanay



Search Party
2008, oil on canvas, 100 cm x 175 cm
(39 x 69 in).

Benjamin Rubloff

Born: 1975, New York
Lives: Berlin

American painter Benjamin Rubloff lives in Berlin. His haunting paintings explore how, in our media- and image-saturated world, notions of place and presence and the distinction between private and public have shifted to become more complex and ambiguous than ever before.



Technique

For me, the imperative is to get at a particular behaviour that each painting has, that is rooted in the image and in my relationship to the image. I work from photographs, but the paintings are not straight translations of the image; they are responses to the images, in which I work at bringing forth what attracts me to an image in the first place.

I do work directly with photographs, but the set of correspondences that I seek out in the process are more rooted in memory, in my remembered experience of things. I suppose that is where the question of atmosphere comes in: how does one find a way to present things in their original context? I am interested in how practices of recall overlap, where photographic images and memories and the visceral experience of direct observation become intertwined, like the way one confuses a personal memory with a photograph, or a lived experience with a movie. There is an uncanny kind of slippage that strikes me as an important way that paintings resonate; they are part of the world and they also reference our experience of the world.

Cinematic painting

Atmosphere is a primary concern. I am particularly interested in how a commonplace image assumes an uncommon presence. The paintings are based on a fragmentary collection of images; they are pretty thin, the structure of the surfaces is understated, and so I rely quite heavily on atmosphere to energize the space. The relationship to cinema is an interesting question because I think that film [also] relies so heavily on atmosphere to create a context for meaning. The relationship between film and paintings is certainly in that space, where the presentation of a detail, an interior or a landscape ignites a particular kind of response.

Other media

I am intrigued by the strange effects photographs produce that we accept as reality. In the popular imagination, the photographic and the real are intertwined, but it's really the case only insofar as photographs have become our way of qualifying reality.

I am influenced by new photographic technologies, especially those that are used for surveillance, mapping and virtual imaging. As a lot of my work has to do with ideas of secrecy and concealment, I have explored the language of these new technologies and ways of seeing quite a bit to try and get a handle on how they function and how we relate to these kinds of images. It's broadening the language and changing our behaviour in relationship to images. Everything has become an image, but images remain rather mysterious and complex and, for me, there is always something secretive in them.

Favourite subjects

I am drawn to images and subjects that hold tightly to their façades and do not give themselves up easily. This has led me to work with a lot of architectural subjects – allotment gardens, suburbs, apartment buildings – places where the social and the private overlap. I am interested in how the necessity of privacy demands a certain degree of refusal, of limited access. This kind of refusal fascinates me because it provokes an anxiety about what is inside. I think it's a primary anxiety of our times, this fear and suspicion about what might be hidden or ulterior. That anxiety was also the starting point for the 'Captive' series, which is based on images of suspected militants being apprehended in the Middle East. There is a staging going on in those kinds of media images. I wanted to bring that to the fore, to explore the ways in which we might experience an image differently when we see the shell of the figure – the clothing – which conceals identities through its banality, but also manages to communicate something about the violence that

one sees in the figure. What is drawing me back to figurative painting is this aspect of biopolitics: in the post-9/11 era, the body is increasingly subject to surveillance and suspicion. It's a significant way in which our view of the figure is shifting.

The realist mode

In my mind, the prevalence of reality TV, social networking technology and surveillance points to a visual culture that is increasingly concerned with surfaces and appearances, all in a language that normalizes this engagement through a vernacular that is informal, casual and unstaged. The visual language of contemporary media creates an interesting set of problems for the realist mode in painting.

Through painting, I seek to shift the relationship between a viewer and an image. For me, painting is a way of destabilizing things, of creating a slippage that is productive in terms of how we grapple with images and their contexts.

Captive #3
2012, oil on canvas, 60cm x 90 cm
(23³/₈ x 35¹/₂ in).



Captive #4
2012, oil on canvas, 90cm x 60 cm
(35½ x 23⅞ in).



Talk
2011. oil on paper, 127cm x 98 cm
(50 x 38½ in).



The Wait
2011, oil on canvas, 40cm x 30 cm
(15¾ x 11¾ in).

