

In Its Place

On first impression, Manuel Stehli's paintings emit a feeling of tranquility, yet not without an undercurrent of ambiguity and reticence. His large works depict two or three people interacting, talking or touching, but the atmosphere is muted, as if they are frozen in time, in a permanent moment of stand-still. These anonymous people, looking almost identical with slight variations, appear to be fully engaged with one another within the canvas, unaware of the viewers' gaze. Their faces are hazy, either suspiciously blurred or blank, thus emotionally unrevealing. It is nearly impossible to tell their state of mind from their postures, even though the scale makes them feel extremely intimate. Looking at these life-sized paintings is meant to be a full-body experience, as if being among a shadow of a crowd. At the same time, the desire to get closer to the paintings reminds us what we see is merely a mirage, a projection. The surface of painting becomes a threshold, and its interior space is impenetrable. It shows that the painting is not only a physical thing on the wall but also an image which, to quote Jena-Luc Nancy, "establishes simultaneously a withdrawal and a passage that, however, does not pass."¹ So how do we see beyond the surface?

Manuel collects stock photos of people—the kind of images that can often be found in brand imagery or in marketing campaigns on social media—and incorporates them in his oil paintings. Stock images are functional, serving as illustrations of specific moods or situations, and their meanings are therefore utterly dependent on the purpose and context, be it social, cultural or psychological. They can seem unnatural or ludicrous for lack of authenticity and nuances when examined independently. For the sake of legibility and effective communication, this visual genre embraces an impersonal performance style and photography's old claim of objectivity. However, Manuel is perceptive enough to notice a potential discrepancy between their body language and true feelings, stemming less from bad acting than from a dismissal of subjectivity. For him, this anonymity is only functional to a degree. He explains that "all stock images, no matter how clichéd and simplified, use human individuals as their material. Their individuality almost comes across as an unwanted side effect, as an imperfection that can't be removed. There is a sense of a tragic (or comical) triumph of the individual in its physical presence."²

Paradoxically, all the traits and gestures are further removed or minimalised in his paintings. The 'actors' portrayed are neither imaginary nor real, but 'simulated' in deliberate distortion, and as stand-ins for the originals, their humanness can look a little uncanny. Although Manuel uses stock images as inspiration and source material, he takes long detours to arrive at the final results. The original situations are no longer visible or readable. By stripping away any kind of context and extracting the necessary signifiers, which Manuel himself refers to as "fragments", he transforms a painting of bodies into a distilled, pure presence in itself, something he wants the audience to encounter and feel without labels and preconceptions.

Painted in an elegant and coherent color palette, these deceptively simple images have a strong and unifying tonal quality and rhythm. Visually they are closer to computer generated imagery created based on an abstract representation of the physical world. With bodies coalescing and surroundings merging into a composition of geometric shapes, the clear delineations between figure and space allow them to exist in a dynamic equilibrium and mutuality. Each visual element is contingent upon one another to form the image of human interaction, to create a visual language that is mesmerising in its simplicity. This careful construction of foreground and background brings the focus back to the flatness of the surface, to its two-dimensionality, rather than to the illusion of depth or objective reality. The artist's gesture is manifested in the palpable texture and the materiality of the paint, while his presence is subtle, and he erases his traces.

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Image—the Distinct" in *The Ground of the Image*, trans. by Jeff Fort (New York : Fordham University Press, 2005).

²Manuel Stehli in an email conversation with this author, June 30, 2022.

Following this perspective, one may come to the awareness that Manuel's paintings are not about actual people occupying actual space, but about the complexity of perception. An image makes a mark in the mind, and forms a subjective projection. But here our projection is withheld, and it is only after such boundary has been established through the painterly surface, by keeping a distance from immediate imposing identity on what is in front of us, we begin to truly see the images as they are, to understand that seeing is a personal experience.

If we are willing to look closer, we might notice the paint in some areas has been intentionally scraped off, and in some other areas, the space between the figures becomes uncertain, evoking badly rendered digital images. These murky edges are like clues, and they left an opening for imagination and curiosity. This is perhaps more evident in his paintings of the fortresses, or close-up composition of hands, as they provide a neutral space, a moment of pure being, to meditate and feel within. By cleaning out unnecessary details, a structure or a new order appears, revealing a condensation of human existence and its mystery. If these images can be regarded as some sort of portraits, what they have captured are glimpses of lived human experience, or as the painter Balthus once said in his memoir, "a gap in the unknown (une trouée dans l'inconnu)"³.

There is a deep humanity in Manuel's unique negotiation between the photographic image and painting. It requires, on the one hand, recognising the superficialness of how images are consumed and interrogating the logic underlying such consumption, and on the other, consciously re-enacting visual experience through the physical act of painting and making it a creative practice. In the increasingly digital and virtual world, with so much of our lives taken place online, the exhibition *In Its Place* offers us an opportunity to slow down and ponder, to return to our bodies and to reconnect with our inner world.

Elise Chen

³Balthus with Alain Vircondelet, *Vanished Splendors: A Memoir*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (New York: Ecco, 2002), p.70.