

Laurent Proux

Line-off ceremony

June 10th - July 22nd, 2017

Opening on Saturday June 10th, from 11 am to 9 pm

From the outset, Laurent Proux reiterates his longstanding preoccupation with two groups of images: on the one hand, those of factories and workstations that he transposes into full-scale paintings/decors, spaces as filled with visual events as they are bereft of human presence; and on the other hand, paintings of fragmented bodies, torn apart in a sort of collage, in which different layers and graphic registers are superposed. The canvases featured in this new exhibition at the Semiose gallery fall into this second series. A third category also appears for the first time, images that have been directly and prosaically brought from the factory, where, there too, visual and graphic materials were produced for the workers.

The artist's recent, large-scale paintings put on show bodies that have been de-rationalized, dehumanized and their fate assigned. It is by no means accidental that the source-images chosen by Laurent Proux date from the 1970s—an epoch that encompassed the still balmy days following on from the sexual revolution as well as the first oil crisis. These source images, taken from German dating magazines—ads and photos self-produced by the readership—are particularly admired by the artist for their instability and their materiality, in line with the impurity of the vintage image. They are also the backlash of a moral revolution that didn't keep its promise: a revolution that certainly did produce a short-term liberalization of sexual mores, but which was never accompanied by a true process of emancipation of consciences. From this point an industrious logic kicked in and the sexualized body was assimilated, made productive and transformed into merchandise. Pierre Klossowski at the time, perceived the fulfillment of a Sadeian prophecy, where desires became confused: "It is no coincidence that in his descriptions of various perverse behaviors, de Sade anticipated the principles underlying modern industrialism: the commodification of sensual emotions, the sexualization of merchandise. Industry is a factor in the neutralization of sensitivity in that it absorbs instinctual energies in the manufacture of instruments, machines and tools..."¹

Laurent Proux puts forward an observation that is both intellectually surprising and visually stimulating: Flemish and contemporary painting find themselves at each extremity of the history of capitalism. Flemish painting developed in the cultural cradle resulting from the beginnings of international trade at the end of the Middle Ages, in Antwerp amongst other places; conversely, contemporary painting saw the light of day during a period that finds late capitalism in crisis, a situation that has had a global effect since the beginning of the 21st century. Questions concerning the economic order of the world have always colored Laurent Proux's painting and thought. His previous exhibition at Semiose Gallery in 2015 was entitled "La main invisible (the Invisible Hand)", a reference to Adam Smith's economic theory, according to which, the pursuit of personal gain by each individual contributes to the general well-being of society. Is this enough to consider Laurent Proux's painting as social criticism...

Lets get back to the painting, since that's what we are here for. What can we see? And what can't we see? Paintings with yawning holes torn in the foreground revealing underlying images, fueling the dialectic of what is shown and what is hidden and exacerbating the spectator's scopophilic desire. Although this device serves to increase the erotic charge of the image, this effect is rapidly neutralized by the vision of "manufactured bodies"—to use a phrase coined by Laurent Proux himself. Both object as well as subject, these isolated limbs, arms, hands, legs seize and are seized, are expropriated yet give themselves willingly. This voracious desire for prehension, objectifies the human being and necessitates incessant accumulation.

The eye of the spectator is in for a difficult ride with the constant ruptures of register and style, the visual discontinuity of the motifs and materials, angles and scales. While it attempts to sweep across the surface of the canvas, delving beneath the cutout ghostly silhouettes, it is constantly drawn towards details and anecdotes—a face or an object that seems familiar—that occupy the mind like some kind of fixation. Contemplation thus becomes obsession and finally irreducible rumination. The eye struggles with contradictions; amongst which are the projected shadows that lend depth to the graphic features, while distorting the spectator's vision of the whole. The painting groans under the lumpy materials, unnatural greens dizzying the eye, the pockmarked surfaces compete with fleshy color gradients.

¹ Extract from the preparatory notes for *La monnaie vivante* (Pierre Klossowski & Pierre Zucca, 1970) in «Décisionnisme poétique. Sur la genèse de *La monnaie vivante*» by Walter Seitter, published in *Lignes de fuite*, the electronic cinema magazine.

His taste for collage and triviality evokes Werner Büttner, who Laurent Proux met at art school in Hamburg, the saturation, circular composition and sinuous lines remind us of Brice Marden and finally the juxtaposition of registers recall Dieter Roth and in particular his series “Picadillies” executed on postcards during the 1970s.

Erik Verhagen noted the “tension between the abstract and figurative polarities¹” in Laurent Proux’s painting. This observation still holds true for these dismembered bodies. Above all, because a dismembered body, however realistic it might be, is an abstraction in the human mind and always elicits a desire for mental reconstruction. It goes against the reflex for anthropomorphism, which influences the observation of any image—two points, a vertical and a horizontal line form a face for example. Secondly, because Laurent Proux alternates between registers and pictorial techniques, from the squaring off cut-outs of his source images to a drawing technique that is both spirited and stylized. From figurative to abstract, from objectivity to subjectivity.

A phenomenological approach is equally effective in the analysis of Laurent Proux’s painting. In his previous factory scenes, the spectator was invited to throw himself headlong into the industrial environments, becoming a machine operator, summoned to take hold of a handle or to heave himself onto a platform, specifically painted for the occasion. Once again, in the case of these more recent paintings, the body of the spectator is confronted with the bodies that are represented on a life-size scale and stimulating empathy; despite ourselves, we can never escape the temptation of “seeing oneself” in the image.

The most recent canvases announce a fresh direction given by Laurent Proux to his painting. From his incursions into disused factories, the artist has brought back images of safety signs and posters, defaced by time and damaged by events. From these ready-made visuals, the artist has created small canvasses where the original texts and images fight it out with gaps, stains and accidents. Many of the original posters were signed by Bernard Chadebec, the graphic master of the art of getting across forceful safety messages and it is as if his treatment of the relationship between man and machine was destined to enthrall Laurent Proux. These paintings are another variation of his “manufactured bodies”, where benevolent injunctions—protect your eyes, avoid errors—are nonetheless orders that underline the fact that the worker’s body is a valuable resource for the employer: a terrifying observation of cynicism under a false air of solicitude.

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Translation Chris Atkinson

¹ Laurent Proux, *-ship*, text by Erik Verhagen, graphism by Jennifer Savignon, Collection Adera, 2013