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A GLOOMY SUNSET, A SEA OF AMUSEMENTS

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When Donald Trump addressed the UN General Assembly in September 2018, pockets of the audience collapsed in laughter. The Internet resorted to a three-decade old quotation by the media theorist Neil Postman: "Everything in our background has prepared us to know and resist a prison when the gates begin to close around us, but who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements? To whom do we complain, and when, and in what tone of voice, when serious discourse dissolves into giggles?" The quotation was unearthed and did the rounds, and then the sentiment dissipated. Even these stark warnings become tropes, appropriated, meme-ified, quoted knowingly as they're cycled round the closed system of 24-hour non-stop reportage, the relentless refresh of news feeds, the reverberation of the echo chamber where laughter guarantees the repetition of past mistakes.

It is in this twilight space, caught between what is funny and what is sinister, that Amir Khojasteh's work exists. The paintings found in *The Gloomiest Sunset in the World*, his solo show at Carbon 12, are absurd: *The Master #1, #2 and #3* (2018) are a triptych of skinny men, their faces stretched tall and taut, as if air-brushed ad infinitum by the demands of a cracked ego; *Studies of The Head of the Orange Men* (2019) sees two glum rounds, the swash of paint a movement that bounds along doggedly, a hunch of poor posture, a stingy smear of black the features of discontent. These paintings are funny, invoking Postman's sea of amusements, a peal of laughter conjuring a tangerine Trump, mid-flounce, storming out of frame.

The presences invoked are always associative, any possible readings deliberately, maddeningly subjective – we're never afforded more than fleeting details, yet the political despots and unmentionables hover. It is their very ambiguity which unsettles: faces and forms on the cusp of recognition, just out of reach like a forgotten word that itches on the tip of the tongue. These gestural gusts of paint are an aesthetic plausible deniability, the evasiveness of an age where everything is hyper documented, but fact is a mutable quality.

The references are all repetitions – of figures from history, of specific source works by 20th century painters – and Khojasteh approaches each with a kind of imitation ad absurdum. Testing the limits of recognition, he first draws from the original, rehashing and regurgitating feverishly until he renders from memory. He explains: "I look through art history like a wandering boy lost in a library, looking through images as if they do not belong to a hierarchy of history... They're all equal images to me, evoking my curiosity and feelings as if I am seeing an image in the news." Each work stalks the boundaries of signification, as if attempting to locate where they cease to 'mean', detached from whatever the original intended, pushing to a place where the power of prestige is evacuated. "I take images and work with them until they disintegrate," he says.

The associations fall two ways: posed, leering visages conjure dictators and despots, but they're hung, jumbled, with remixes of the classics – 21st century riffs on works from painting's 20th century heyday. Belonging to the breezy interlude offered by this second grouping are two figures after Matisse (Study after The Romanian Blouse by Henri Matisse #1 and #2), the details of an original only present in name whooshed across two separate canvasses. These expansive billows, contracting first tall then broad, bounce sonorously like the round sound of the title's Romanian Blouse. This connection between aurality and aesthetic is found repeatedly, as if each piece is an annunciation informed as much by its telling and titling as it is by any visual association to an original – whatever that might be.

The presence of these art-riffs speaks to the latent power of all images, the interleaving of culture and political history suggesting an uneasy and entwined relationship between the two. The distortions might test the limits of signification, but our reading is always predicated on a conditioned arsenal of references: we have been trained to glean economic and political meaning our whole lives in an endless merry-go-round of tacitly agreed tropes. As repetition conditions our understanding, it also enshrines power.

This was the central premise of John Berger's seminal *Ways of Seeing*, "The process of seeing paintings – or seeing anything else – is less spontaneous and natural than we tend to believe. A large part of seeing depends upon habit and convention." The exhibition plays with such conventions, distorting the repetitions to call attention to their affect. *Blue President* (2019), a small and innocuous work, a slick of soothing hues suffusing calm as it surveys the gallery entrance from on high, occupies the same social space as omnipresent portraits found in hotel lobbies. The positioning becomes another kind of signifier: you do not need to be familiar with the figure in Khojasteh's work to know this space is reserved for the powerful.

Though we cannot definitively identify the players in these frames, we tune into the tropes and know they share insidious parallels with their forebears. It's easy to read the fissures of a broken past radiating through our present, the distortions of each canvas suggesting great pace, a hurtling inevitability towards the same ends – as if the gloomiest sun is setting with resignation on the same tired, repeated mistakes.

Khojasteh renders gloom with such remarkable vibrancy it's hard to end here – though the works appear dashed and automatic, there is no morass of paints elided, no muddy chaos of brown and grey. Instead, animated and clean, these are moments of motion. Even revolution demands repetition; it's as inherent to the process as it is to the cyclic nature of this exhibition's title – sunsets and worlds, turning determinedly and relentlessly.

Potential can be stalked in spaces of gradual alteration, a procession of micro-shifts within apparently fixed systems. These are works of kinesis not entropy; in the inevitability of repetition there's also, always, the energy for change. Gloomy sunsets are not apocalyptic and Khojasteh is optimistic: "Sunset is a mysterious and abstract moment – it's full of contradictory feelings, both sad and joyful. It's like catching a leaf as it floats. A moment of tranquility to dream, to escape, to lose and start all over again."