

The New York Times

What to See in New York City Art Galleries This Week

3 August 2017 | By Roberta Smith and Will Heinrich

KAREL FUNK

Through Aug. 18. 303 Gallery, 555 West 21st Street, Manhattan; 212-255-1121, 303gallery.com.

Karel Funk's oil paintings remain unwavering in their concentration on well-made outerwear. At 303 Gallery, in his first gallery show in New York since 2010, Mr. Funk continues to meticulously render the heads and shoulders of subjects who have their backs to the viewer and are wearing bright nylon parkas with the hoods up, silhouetted against white. They are, in other words, complete mysteries, their distance intensified because the hoods evoke monks' or nuns' habits. As always, Mr. Funk's art has an undercurrent of religious devotion, maybe even a touch of the medieval.

Our lack of connection to the sitters is strange yet liberating for all concerned. They are cloistered, not displayed for the delectation of either painter or viewer. We, too, are slightly disembodied, free to examine these faceless yet somehow individualized portraits unwatched. Though, in the palpable silence, these figures might be listening, like confessors awaiting our revelations.

There is much to look at, and think about, besides this disruption of the viewer's dominion, including the smooth, knowing perfection of the garments and their high-tech designs; the additions of rougher textures, like Velcro strips and nylon straps; the tiny stitches of their welted seams; and their effulgent colors of yellow, green, red and purple. But each color is set in motion by the quietly unruly topography of creases, sags and folds, and further subdivided by light into a tremendous variety of tones and hues. There is something of the



KAREL FUNK/303 GALLERY

Clockwise from top left, an installation view of "The Times," at the FLAG Art Foundation; Emilia Brintnall's "Ring," left, and Jayson Musson's "Paraguay," both from 2017; and two 2017 oil paintings by Karel Funk.

grandeur of landscapes, even mountains or peaks. The dark concave side of a gray hood might almost be a landslide. Finally, there is the conscientious, intimate care with which Mr. Funk achieves this level of realism. Like his subjects, he is unseen, but we feel the intensity of both, along with our own.

ROBERTA SMITH



Karel Funk

303 Gallery
525 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through Aug. 13

Karel Funk's outstanding first solo show breathes some new life into the seemingly exhausted genre of photo-realism. His small portraits push the usual photograph-into-projector-onto-canvas formula into the realm of an intimate, fastidiously crafted hyper-realism that is suffused with an unexpected spirituality. Even more unexpected, these works use tradition, especially Renaissance portraiture, in a fresh, forward-looking manner.

Each of the 11 paintings on view, which average about 16 inches high, depicts the head of a young man. The subjects usually wear crisp, seemingly new Gore-Tex jackets with hoods, whose shapes and folds often serve as pedestals for their heads or mask them with startlingly abstract shapes.

It is of paramount importance that these figures' eyes never meet ours. Seen from the back, or with their eyes closed or their faces obscured by their hoods, they are completely available to our scrutiny but also aloof. In one of the best works, a sky-blue hood obscures all but the lower profile of its wearer, and the curve of nose, lips and chin has an almost geometric rhythm. In another a young man scrunches into a high-collared jacket so that the tab of his zipper seems to hang, like a drawer pull, from his nose.

Without seeming academic, these works bring to mind both the poses and the dignified unselfconsciousness of Verrocchio's angels, Zurbarán's monks, the bit players in Caravaggio's more elaborate scenes and, in one case, the exacting profile of Piero della Francesca's portrait of Federico da Montefeltro.

Like Chuck Close, Alex Katz, Peter Cain and other figurative painters, Mr. Funk establishes a clear tension between image and paint. And as with their work, as opposed to, say, a Van Eyck, the closer you get to Mr. Funk's surfaces, the more information they divulge about his painting process.

The difference is that moving closer to Mr. Funk's images doesn't destroy the breathtaking, careful illusions of skin, hair and fabric. The clarity of detail gives them the exactitude of folk art figures without the distortions, while their slightly magnified size makes their details more available to the human eye than those of actual heads.

As a result, the work offers an amazing conflation of process and image, of doing and seeing. The unusual balance between cause and effect creates a profound sense of the time, attention and care that went into making the images. The paintings are just dry and understated enough that this tender, patient veneration is assumed by the figures themselves, imbuing them with a sense of exalted, even prayerful concentration.

It is not usual to see a style as developed and whole as Mr. Funk's in a first show, but it does make you wonder what is left for him to do.

ROBERTA SMITH