

Karel Funk talks about painting hoodies in the style of the Old Masters

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Karel Funk, *Untitled #80*, 2016, Acrylic on panel, 58.4 x 64.1 cm.
Photograph courtesy of 303 Gallery, New York, NY.

A realist painter who uses the term “urban voyeurism” to describe his approach, Karel Funk creates portraits of subjects at odd close-up angles, as though they were standing next to you on a crowded train or bus. Born in Winnipeg, Manitoba—where he still lives—Funk studied at Columbia University. Combining an interest in the Old Masters with skateboard fashions, Funk has become known for polished portrayals of people in hooded jackets. While readying for his latest show at Chelsea’s 303 Gallery, the artist spoke about his new paintings and why he seems to focus so much on outerwear.

What prompted you to adopt realism as your style?

I have a love for the history of portrait painting. I really like Hans Holbein and Albrecht Dürer and think about them a lot, though not as much as I did when I was younger.

How did you manage to work that interest into a contemporary context?

When I moved to New York, around 2000, I was reading a lot about postmodernism and about the borrowing of signifiers. And there were artists at the time—Richard Phillips, John Currin—who were doing just that with realism. They were borrowing from everywhere, and that seemed to make sense with what I was reading. So I began to pursue a sort of pastiche quality in my paintings, as a way to create a bridge between the present and history; I wanted my paintings to owe something to the past and to modern urban experience, including fashion.

What draws you to painting models in hooded jackets?

Again, that came out of my interest in Renaissance portraiture and finding a way to link that with something from the everyday. We all have rain jackets, windbreakers and hoodies, so I thought that would make the paintings contemporary. And the hoods can be twisted, crumpled and turned any way I want, which makes them a way to also explore more formal considerations.

The images have a very haunting quality. Is that intentional?

The hoods have become more intense and maybe a little bit more haunting because of the way I light them. I use the creases and folds I do to make the paintings more dynamic. They could reflect the character of the person under the hood or simply represent a tension between subject and painting. I like to keep it ambiguous.

In your latest paintings, you've left the hoods completely empty. Why?

Sometimes I think about the feeling a hoodie gives off, because you never know what the person underneath is doing. They might be texting or something. There's always going to be that psychological element, because it's a figure. But as the hoodies become more abstract, I like to think the wearer becomes more abstract, too.