



Michaël Borremans: Horse Hunting

David Zwirner

7 MARCH – 1 APRIL

Michaël Borremans's quiet and enigmatic show extends and deepens the artist's interest in the grand traditions of history painting and portraiture and their applicability today to enduring questions of power, human emotion, identity and self. Until recently, Borremans based his images on found photographs and depicted odd vignettes in which figures, dressed in period costume and thus freighted with a ghostly sense of times past, seemed trapped in the performance of nonsensical tasks. In *Horse Hunting*, he has moved on from these too obviously contrived scenes to sparer and less studied compositions painted from models in his studio.

The new works are rife with specific and general references to Old Master paintings and conventions of composition. In *Three Men Standing* (2005) and *The Avoider* (2006), for instance, figures are placed against a putty-grey background, much the way Zurbarán set his saints against uniform dark grounds. *The Bodies (1)* (2005) depicts two young men, perhaps dead, supine before a wall in poses clearly referencing Manet's *The Dead Toreador* (c.1864). In all, strong shadows, often cast by multiple light sources, identify the works as scenes created in a studio, while the cropping of the images – two of the three men standing are cut off by the edge of the picture, for example – suggests that what is represented is but part of a greater reality: both literally, in terms

of a larger scene in the painter's atelier, and metaphorically, in the way that Zurbarán intended his images to reveal greater spiritual truths.

Borremans remains obscure about what those truths are. *Three Men Standing* references the firing squads in Manet's *Execution of the Emperor Maximilian* (1867–8) and Goya's *The Third of May, 1808* (1814), but Borremans's figures, the middle of which appears doltish and distant, could as easily be executioners as prisoners. *Portrait* (2005) depicts the head of a middle-aged man of little distinction, the right side of whose face seems mildly deformed, hinting at some hidden malevolence. This could be a Slobodan Milošević at the beginning of his career, the mild-mannered clerk turned killer, or simply an acquaintance the artist asked to pose. Perhaps Borremans is alluding to the banality of evil, or suggesting that violence stupefies both oppressor and victim, although in different measure. What he needs to develop further in his beautiful paintings is the kind of clear conviction and subtle vision the masters he quotes brought to their work. JM

Above from left
Michaël Borremans *Horse Hunting*, 2005, oil on canvas, 130 x 100 cm
COURTESY DAVID ZWIRNER GALLERY, NEW YORK

Inka Essenhigh, *Setting Sun*, 2005, oil on canvas, 190 x 177 cm
COURTESY 303 GALLERY, NEW YORK



Inka Essenhigh

303 Gallery

4 MARCH – 8 APRIL

Sometime after 2003, Inka Essenhigh decided to leave behind the aggressively graphic, anime-inspired quality that has marked so much of her work. The draughtsman's black outlines were abandoned and greater store was placed on gradations of colour to define the languid contours of her creepy figures and landscapes. (One wonders if working in the same stable as Sue Williams, a master of the graphic line, pushed Essenhigh in this direction.) Three years later, the artist seems to have fully settled in to this new mode of making paintings. If the terms 'graphic' can be applied to these new pieces at all, it would only be in the sense marshalled by motion-picture rating systems. Nevertheless, the fundamental unreality of Essenhigh's scenes renders any and all content – the violence of a wrestling match, the disembowelling of a sleeping woman, a mêlée on a subway train – rather palatable (or dare I say, aestheticized).

I trust I am not risking too much by stating that Essenhigh's new painting issues from a British sensibility, one that has become a rather profitable export for the Isles in recent years. Americans, it seems, have a real taste for works of British literary fantasy. Of course, much of this has been cooked up by Hollywood's rediscovery of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis (all of which is undoubtedly flavoured by J.K. Rowling's arrival on the scene). But there remains the critical and commercial success of works like Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995–2000) and Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (2005). To my mind, Essenhigh's work traffics in the ethereal worlds conjured by these authors, just as it exceeds – to good effect – the qualities of mere comic book animation.

British artists, on the other hand, seem to be tackling the hard core of physical realities (two recent Turner Prize winners, Keith Tyson and Simon Starling, immediately come to mind), whereas we Yanks are in a thrall to the fantastical and the hallucinatory – think Alexis Rockman and Lari Pittman in painting, Gregory Crewdson in photography, Matthew Barney in who knows what.

Call this escapist. Call it regressive. (And yes, call it simplistic.) No assessment would be wrong. Undoubtedly it will be said that fantasy is the mode of choice when confronted with the political and economic nightmares of war and debt. For me, this is too reactive; after all, the American literary scene is dominated by the (hyper) realism of Rick Moody and Jonathan Franzen (even though, thanks to James Frey, memoir is now a sub-genre of sci-fi). The task at hand, it seems, is not to file all this work away through such stock associations, but to ask again and again why we (the artist and the audience) are seeing what we do, and why such seeing may be, must be, different from place to place.

JTDN

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