

The exhibition by Rūtė Merk at the National Gallery of Art exposes the promises of technology and the limits of corporeality

📅 2024-07-01



At 6 pm Friday, 5 July the National Gallery of Art of the LNMA opens Promises, an exhibition by the international acclaimed painter Rūtė Merk. The visitors are invited to reflect how the advanced technology alters our bodies, to revisit the very concept of corporeal and how the medium of painting is capable of rendering the desires of our time and the promises of technologies. The exhibition will be on until 6 October.

“By putting on this Rute Merk’s exhibition the National Gallery of Art gains a firm support on two legs, by linking the museum’s common historic time with our time, or maybe even “the promised” future. Our inspiration is the artist herself, and I am positive she will enthuse the viewer too with her fantastic renditions of our well-familiar present captured using the medium of painting”, Lolita Jablonskienė, director of the NGA says.

The artist flirting with the history of art

In her exhibition Promises, Merk, lionized by the Lithuanian and foreign art critics as one of the most intriguing artists of the young generation, opts for the classical genres of portrait and still life and the traditional painting in oils to design the archetypes of our time and their shifting boundaries in the contemporary world. The material and virtual, the natural and artificial, the particular and abstract are bedfellows in her art pieces.

The curator of the event Inesa Brašiškė describes how the artist fashions her portraits from the elements dug from digital culture, merged with her personal experience and impressions. “Even though Merk’s portraits flirt with the history of painting, there are no doubts they evoke not the times of folds of robes, but of sweatpants and business casual suits. These are the types representing popular culture and fashion, and the idiosyncrasies of the millennials, produced from bits and parts of the artist’s memories, impressions and a deliberate archeology of the digital culture.

21st-century-still life on show

According to the exhibition curator, several centuries ago, still life painters created arrangements of trophies, ripe fruit, cut flowers to convey the ideas of mortality, of the cycles of nature and the prosperity of the middle class. The still lifes by Merk also show contemporary consumer products that have become attributes of the contemporary aestheticized lifestyle and economic good fortunes.

“The overblown, nearly abstract motif of latte aspires to become an allegory for the global economic networks and the frenzied culture of productivity. In her paintings the difference between the natural and the synthetic collapses. The blue phalaenopsis unknown to nature, the ideally looking identical engineered fruit address the interventions into the most intimate levels of nature,” the curator of the exhibition Brašiškė says.

In the light of screen suns

Some of the pieces by Rūtė Merk will strike the viewer as images from video games and 3D animations generated by the digital image editing software. According to the curator, the painter’s colour scheme, her visual effects, figure modelling and composition result in products intended for on-screen viewing. “The dissolving, hazy, out-of-focus abstract backgrounds leave you with an uncanny feeling as if being created not for the human, but rather an artificial eye”, the curator of the exhibition notes.

The exhibition invites to ponder on what, and also how we see in the light of screen suns.

Rūtė Merk (b. 1991) is a Lithuanian painter based in Berlin. She graduated in painting from Vilnius Academy of Arts and Munich Academy of Fine Arts. She received the DAAD scholarship in 2023, and won the Audience Choice Award at the JCDecaux Young Painter Prize. The artist’s work appeared in solo and group exhibitions in New York City, Shanghai, Berlin, Munich, Kyiv and Vilnius. Her work has been acquired by the MO Museum in Vilnius, M Woods in Beijing, ICA Miami, the MAMCO in Geneva, the Sifang Art Museum in Nanjing, and by other art institutions.

Curator Inesa Brašiškė

Coordinators: Beatričė Mockevičiūtė, Austėja Tavoraitė

Architects: Beatričė Mockevičiūtė, Mindaugas Reklaitis

Designers: Gailė Pranckūnaitė, Laura Grigaliūnaitė

Translator Paulius Balčytis

Partners: VACANCY, TARA DOWNS, SIXCHAIRS BOOKS

Media partner JCDecaux Lietuva

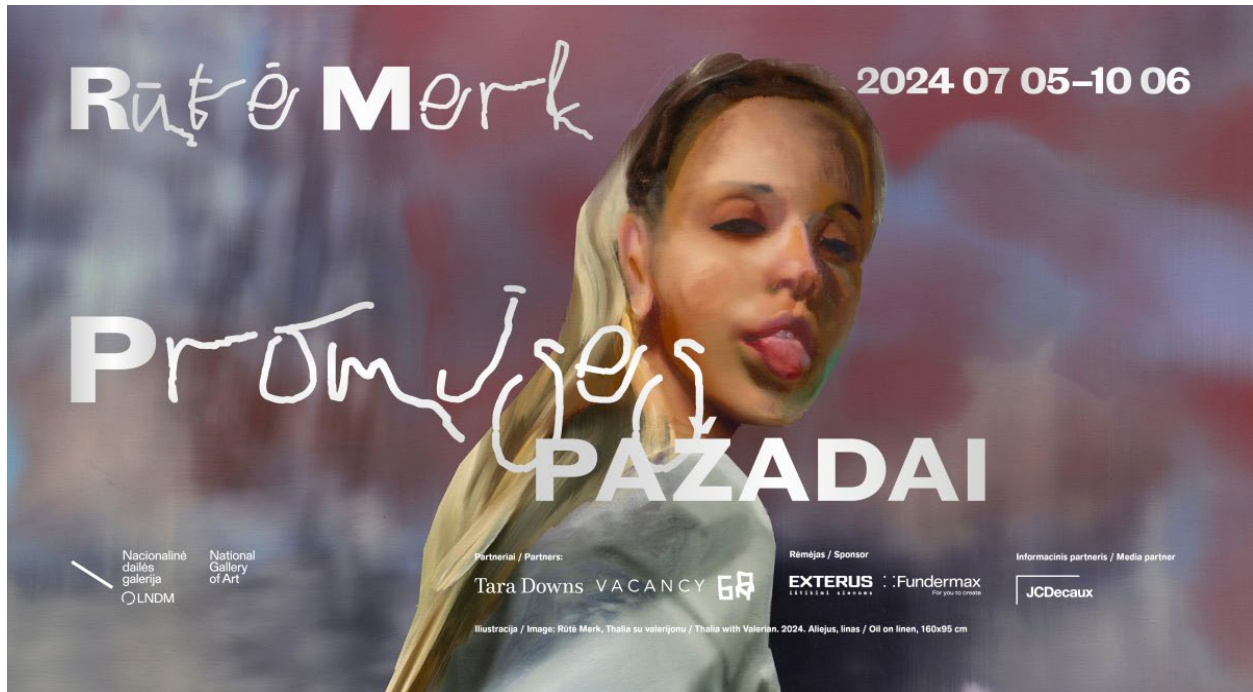
echo gone wrong

The exhibition by Rūtė Merk at the National Gallery of Art exposes the promises of technology and the limits of corporeality

2024 07 05 — 2024 10 06 at National Gallery of Art, Vilnius

Author Echo Gone Wrong

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XP
Rute Merk
Tara Downs
May 4 - June 15, 2023

Rute Merk's latest at Tara Downs emerges from a machinic acronym, a play of meaning, that initially puts one in mind of emoticons or turn-of-the century operating systems. XP : the combination of these two letters produces a multivalent phrase; in other contexts, it could stand for extreme programming or cross-platforming, and these alternative definitions do not seem too far removed from the maximalist posturing or the feats of translation accomplished by Merk's large-scale oil paintings. Yet by the abbreviation XP, Merk refers particularly to the term experience point, taken from gaming: a unit of virtual achievement earned through gameplay. Extricate this term – experience point – from its immediate context and its peculiarity, its alienating effect, becomes apparent: the compressed economy of the phrase begins to reflect its attempt to turn qualitative data – experience, the raw material of life – into a quantitative measurement.

This is exactly the sort of inversion or transformation that animates Merk's practice, and its predilection toward expressing human affect through the vernacular of screen-based technologies. The artist's nacreous, saturnine oil compositions render a specific digital aesthetic – a sensibility borrowed from role-playing games and virtual worlds

But for all of Merk's ostensive gestures toward relatively novel and disorienting social relations, toward new modes of representation, her work ultimately demonstrates the perceptual capacities inherent to painting as a form: its perpetually unfolding temporality, the continual present-tense of figurative painting, and its fleeting sense of capture, one taken for granted when viewing a photograph, a snapshot, but still uncanny when evoked by painting. Every painting marks indexically an experiential moment, and in turn generates for the spectator an aesthetic encounter, a point of experience. Merk's immersive paintings explicate that fundamental relationship, providing us with iterations of the same scene, positing each as a site of contingency. In this way, the model of Gemia shifts positions and becomes Gemian, both 2023, and through a repetition of objects, the still lifes become dispatches from an intangible world. In the past, in works like *Taihei*, 2020, Merk has presented deeply saturated images of planetary, perhaps solar, eclipse, a suite of paintings that have always seemed tonally foreboding, even apocalyptic. One work on view, *Lunet*, 2023, revives this series, but impedes our engagement with the lugubrious orange of the horizon, the presentiment of ecological disaster. One of Merk's models intrudes on the

– unexpectedly, through some of the most fundamental, traditional techniques available to the painter. Emerging from a space of generational ennui, Merk's simulated world has long been populated by a bevy of disaffected youth, millennial avatars whose own relationships to the artist remain opaquely personal or parasocial, downcast figures invariably clad in athleisure staples like cross-body bags or puffer jackets, and in brands like Arc'teryx, or, most notably, Balenciaga.

Without forsaking her propensity for figuration, the artist's recent paintings also reflect a deeper consideration of the correspondence between screen-based and physical processes: still lifes such as *Fruits and Blue Orchid* or *Apple, Banana, Orange, Pear*, 2023, seem to evoke both the historical painting genre as well as the modeling of advanced engineering in agricultural industries, while the works *Matcha Latte (Swan)* and *Matcha Latte (Heart)*, also 2023, somewhat humorously present an intertextual depiction of latte art – a cheeky nod, perhaps, to art's status as a commodity, and its attendant relationship to consumption. In *Viki*, 2023, one of Merk's models palms the jigsaw-globe logo of Wikipedia, directing us toward another amateur mode of content creation, but also a highly collaborative form of aggregation, reminding us again of the extremes of online connectivity and in-person isolation.

scene, seemingly aloof, unaware of our presence, absorbed in their own activity; they are a contemporary specter – flat as a cardboard cutout and translucent like a hologram – standing between us and the end of the world.

Rute Merk (b. 1991, Lithuania) lives and works in Berlin. She received her BA in Painting from Vilnius Academy of Arts, Lithuania, in 2013, and acquired her painting diploma from Akademie der Bildenden Künste München, Munich, in 2023. Solo exhibitions: Tara Downs, New York, US (2023); Paulina Caspari / beacon, Munich, DE (2023) (forthcoming); Gallery Vacancy, Shanghai, CN (2022); WT Foundation, Kyiv, UA (2021); Downs & Ross, New York, US (2020); Vent Gallery, Vienna, AU (2018); Editorial, Vilnius, LT (2018). Selected group exhibitions: Palais Galliera, Paris, FR (2022); Lobe Block, Berlin, DE (2022); Green Family Art Foundation, Dallas, US (2022); Zuzeum, Riga, LT (2022); Hussenot, Paris, FR (2021); Kunstverein München, Munich, DE (2019); Marburger Kunstverein, Marburg, DE (2019); Rupert, Vilnius, LT (2018); Contemporary Art Center (CAC) Vilnius, LT (2017); 427 Gallery, Riga, LV (2016); Vartai Gallery, Vilnius, LT (2016); Tate, Liverpool, UK (2014); Malmö Konsthall, Malmö, SE (2013). Her works are included in institutional collections internationally including M Woods, Beijing, CN; Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, Geneva, CH; CC Foundation, Shanghai, CN; MO Museum, Vilnius, LT; Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing, CN; and X Museum, Beijing, CN.



Exhibition view: Rute Merk: XP 2023 Tara Downs, New York Image courtesy of the artist and Tara Downs, New York.

W



Rute Merk's Vision for the Future of Painting

In 2020, the Lithuanian artist's surreal, figurative paintings caught the eye of Demna Gvasalia. Here, she opens up about her creative process.

Oct 14, 2021

by **Stephanie Eckardt**
Photographed by **Alex de Brabant**
Styled by **Ann-Kathrin Obermeyer**

You make paintings that feature eerily distorted, modelsque figures resembling characters in an apocalyptic video game. But your work had no connection to fashion when Demna Gvasalia, Balenciaga's creative director, asked you to capture his standout spring/summer 2020 collection for the Italian contemporary art magazine *Mousse*. That ended up inspiring an exhibition titled "SS20," at the New York gallery Downs & Ross, for which you continued the series.

I got an email saying that Demna had come across my work, and at first, it was funny; they asked how I make my images. I've incorporated a photographic quality into my work for the past few years, and they didn't know they were paintings. They wanted me to interpret the collection for a magazine, and to do it very quickly. So when we discussed the technical aspects, I was like, "This is all painting, guys. It takes a lot of time—a long time just to dry."

And yet you delivered six paintings, capturing both the pieces in detail and the set, a makeshift parliament, within two months.

I don't usually do collabs, but I really wanted to do this one—especially because Demna is Georgian. I come from a small town in Lithuania, and I totally recognize some of the things he designs from my childhood: the trendy jeans,

the ugly shoes—it's crazy. And then when Balenciaga said something like, "We feel there's a relationship between your work and ours—the relationship between humans and technology," I totally agreed. I think there is something about the synthetic construction, the inevitability of artificiality. Everything is artificial, but Balenciaga combines this ugliness and scariness in a way that makes it not so scary.

What does originality mean to you?

It's something that catches my eye, that doesn't look generic. It has some virtue in it, and it's somehow noble. It's a little bit like an instinct. I try to be original—who doesn't? As artists, everyone is trying to run away from clichés.

What do you think is your most original trait?

It isn't original to be a painter, but at its best, it's a unique attempt, right? The best part of being an artist is being able to swim in your delusions and play with the mix of elements that other people have used. What we were taught in art school was trying to create something new, something that wasn't already painted. To me, it was very important to find a visual language that would somehow correspond to the 21st century—something you wouldn't mix with a painting from 100 years ago.

What are your delusions? What do you think about when you're painting, or starting to paint?

I think that if you're 100 percent realistic about your capabilities, about what life will bring to you, then there's no way for you to achieve anything. You need a certain amount of delusion. I don't want to indulge insanity—there has to also be control. It's very important to be grounded. Artists have this great imagination, right? They can have this visionary way of thinking, but that can also sometimes come back to bite you. You start to deny things and ignore reality.

How do you find that balance?

With my family. My parents are doctors. They're very practical. There were no artists in my family when I was growing up.

Whom do you consider to be original?

Someone who manages to have an authentic way of life and really changes the status quo, like Greta Thunberg. She's too young to copy anyone, you know? And in art, well, Jan van Eyck, who popularized oil paint.

Do you have a style icon?

Whitney Houston. She was very inspirational to me growing up. But what I wear on a daily basis is really not inspired by anyone; it's just very practical for being in the studio. I put a lot into my paintings, so there's not much left in myself in terms of expression.

What's the most prized possession in your closet?

I got a black T-shirt emblazoned with Barack Obama and Joe Biden, commemorating the 2009 inauguration, passing by a secondhand shop in Munich—one of those 1 euro things they keep outside in the street. I don't even wear it, because I try to preserve it. But when I do, I feel like I'm the most dressed up.

The 6 Best Booths at New York's Independent Art Fair



BY ANDY BATTAGLIA September 10, 2021 4:13pm

As the bigger and brawnier Armory Show aims to start anew on the western edge of Manhattan, the Independent art fair has taken up its typically cooler, cozier station in a new location near the island's southernmost tip. Starting with a preview on Thursday and continuing through the weekend, the slightly slimmed-down satellite fair—with 42 galleries this year, compared to the more normal 50 to 60—fits nicely in the Beaux-Arts-style Battery Maritime Building, recently restored as a home for Cipriani South Street. The ceilings soar, and a terrace out front offers a good perch for people-watching. On the first day, a subdued but solid crowd perused booths presented by domestic galleries from New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Oakland, and Portland as well as international vendors from Vancouver, London, Oslo, Berlin, Cologne, Paris, and Antwerp. Herewith, see works from the six best booths at Independent.

Rute Merk at Downs & Ross



Photo : Phoebe D'eurle/Courtesy the Artist and Downs & Ross

Image: Rute Merk, *Clarice*, 2021.

A Lithuanian artist now based in Berlin, Rute Merk makes paintings “meant to induce a sort of transitivity between the analogue and digital domains,” according to Downs & Ross director Alex Ross. “They speak to painting’s capacity to produce portraiture in an age of the industrialized image and networked identity.” They also hover in a state somewhere between hyperclarity and an otherworldly blur. The longer you look, the more they go in and out of focus—enough so to suggest that both states are, in essence, one and the same.

The Art Detective **ART**

'The Demand Is Off the Charts': At the Independent Fair, Young Figurative Painters Steal the Show (and Draw Mile-Long Wait Lists)

Independent offered a peek at the dynamics shaping the broader art market today.

Katya Kazakina, September 10, 2021



Cipriani at 10 South Street, NY, NY. Photo courtesy of Etienne Frossard and Independent.


Cipriani waiters in signature white jackets served champagne on the balcony of a Beaux Arts building by the waterfront in lower Manhattan.

This scene at the Battery Maritime Building greeted hundreds of VIPs arriving in the rain for the opening of Independent, a boutique expo beloved by the globe-trotting art set. The fair's 12th edition in New York is a coming out of sorts because of the pandemic, which has suspended most live trade shows for over a year. With many European galleries unable to attend, it's a tighter lineup—28 percent fewer exhibitors than last spring.

Independent and the Armory Show were the last fairs many guests attended before lockdown in March 2020. As they return, the stakes are high. Art fair sales, which accounted for 46 percent of annual revenue for galleries in 2019, plummeted to 7 percent during the first half of 2021, according to a new market survey by UBS, which noted "an overwhelming desire" among collectors to return to these events.

For many of Independent's 43 exhibitors, it's the first in-person art fair in 18 months. The return is a mix of new and familiar, at once joyful and jittery—with new venues, masked guests, sold-out booths and, yes, fears of contracting COVID. To quell some of these concerns, the organizers required proof of vaccination and set up timed tickets to enter, controlling the number of people. But the Downs & Ross gallery sold the three canvases in its booth by Rute Merk, a 28-year-old Lithuanian, Berlin-based painter of melancholy and somewhat menacing works that explore the relationship between technology and the figure. Priced at \$20,000 to \$40,000, they sold to public museums, the gallery said.

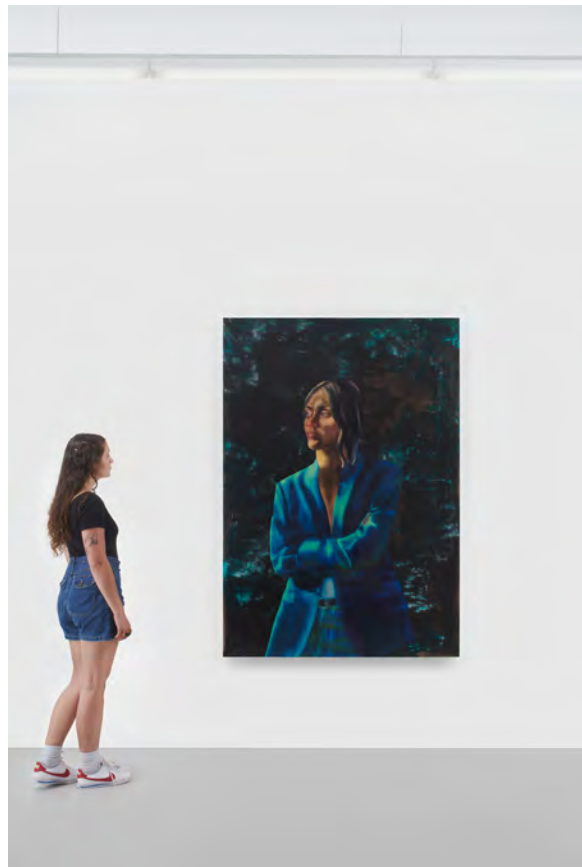
Pre-selling is a necessity because of the demand, explained Alex Ross, a co-founder of the downtown New York gallery. There's a stringent vetting process to weed out potential speculators. Philanthropic history is a must to be considered as a buyer. Asking if the work makes a good investment is a major faux pas.

Artnet News Pro 

Want to Get a Jump on the Collecting Competition? Here Are 6 Rising Stars to Seek Out at Armory Week 2021

We trawled the aisles to find the most exciting up-and-coming talent at the Armory Show, Independent, and Future Fair.

Artnet News, September 10, 2021

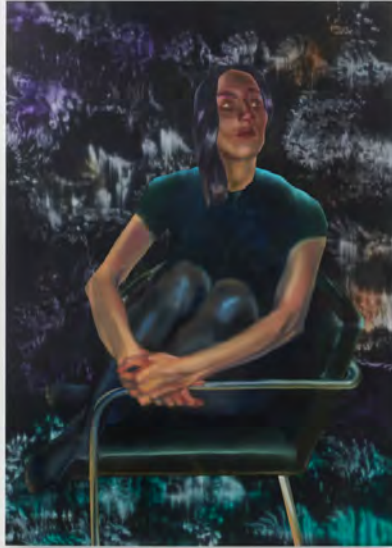


While timed entry and crowd control mean that New York's Armory Week fairs are roomier than they have been at other peak market moments, sales are moving along at a steady clip. Most in demand are paintings that put a twist on figuration, whether by placing the human form in surreal, imaginary settings or by rendering it with novel digital tools.

Gone are the days when collectors clamored for rediscovered dead artists from the '60s and '70s. Today, they want the chance to get in on the ground floor—the first time around.

Which artists across New York's fairs are generating the most buzz this week? See our picks are below.

Rute Merk



Who: Rute Merk (b. 1991) explores the role of the digital in contemporary painting. She contrasts hard-edged shapes with *sfumato* technique to build up eerie and mystical portraits of androgynous, post-human characters.

Based in: Berlin, Germany

Showing at: Downs and Ross, New York, at Independent

Prices: Paintings range from \$20,000 to \$40,000.

Why You Should Pay Attention: Collectors and museums in the U.S., Europe, and Asia are clamoring for the paintings. Her collaboration with fashion house Balenciaga on a series of works resulted in her first show at Downs and Ross.

Notable Resume Line: Merk's paintings have been acquired by Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, Geneve, and the X Museum in Shanghai.

Up Next: In 2022, the artist will have solo shows at an institution in Shanghai and at Downs & Ross in New York. She will also be included in a number of group museum shows, including at the Green Family Art Foundation in Dallas.

—Katya Kazakina

NYC's Armory & Independent Return with Upgrades

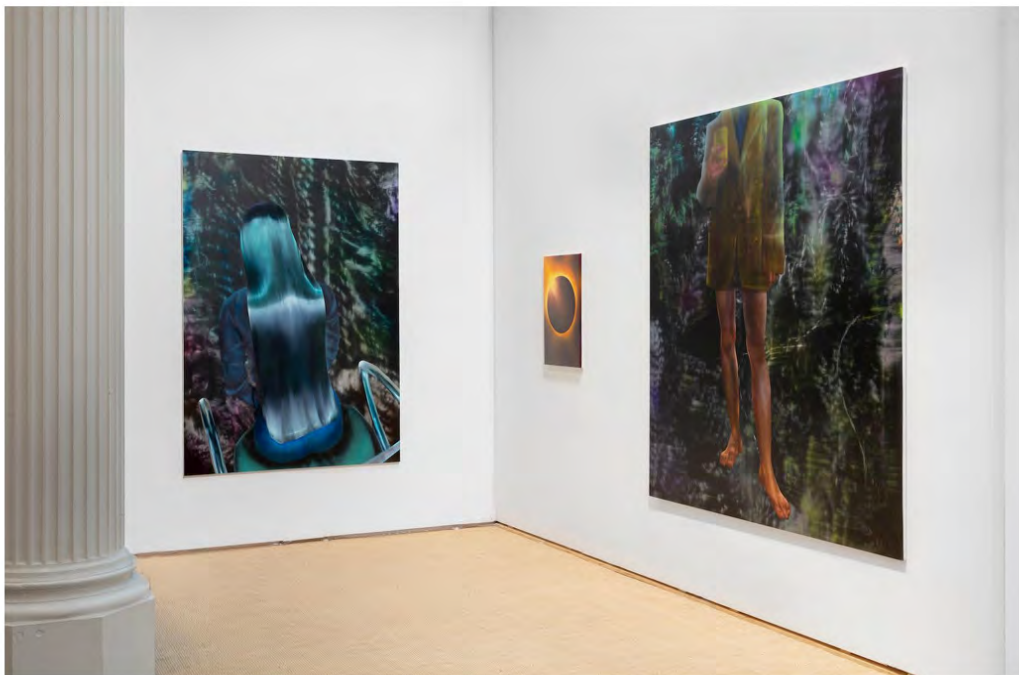


IMAGE COURTESY OF DOWNS & ROSS GALLERY.

Rute Merke, *Terica*, 2021. Oil on linen. 78 x 55 in.

Independent Art Fair

Downs & Ross

The New York City-based gallery stunned fairgoers with a solo presentation of the work of Rute Merk. Merk, a Lithuanian-born painter working out of Berlin, creates hyper-realistic canvases that are in conversation with digital culture, Eastern European social **realist painting**, fashion, and other influences. Merk's lush surfaces create tension between the ethereal and almost out-of-focus effect that her brush strokes achieve, and the larger, harder edges of the faceless subjects in these portraits. Her work challenges the viewer to think beyond digitized realities and pushes painting to another level.

OCULA

ADVISORY PERSPECTIVE

The Armory Show and Independent: Artwork Selections

By Rory Mitchell | New York, 8 September 2021



Rute Merk, *Lina* (2021). Oil on linen. 160 × 110 cm. Courtesy the artist and Downs & Ross, New York. Photo: Phoebe D'Heurle.

Rute Merk at Downs & Ross, Independent

Born in Lithuania in 1991, Rute Merk received her BA in painting from Vilnius Academy of Arts in 2013, followed by a diploma from Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Munich in 2020.

Using the traditional medium of painting, Merk incorporates techniques unique to contemporary technology, including glitches and digital textures.

With sources ranging from Eastern European social realist painting to science fiction, Merk's engagement with the legacy of painting combines past and future, and has been the subject of solo exhibitions across Kyiv, New York, Shanghai, Vienna, and Vilnius.

Independent

Rute Merk on Technologized Subjectivity

by Francesca Gavin
August 2021

How can painting be transformed by our relationship to the digital? In the work of Berlin based, Lithuanian painter Rute Merk, the compositions and concepts of academic painting are fused with the textures, layering, and tools of contemporary technology. Just as cubism explored the intersection of the object and space, so Merk's simulated glitches and digital textures bleed into her figures. Her approach is part of a wider attempt to look at what she describes as "work-leisure living, prosthetic cosmetics and inhuman patterns."

Painting itself was a strange choice of media. "When I started studying painting over 10 years ago the "death of painting" belief was still popular," she points out. Now the medium has proven that it is an ideal way for her to juggle "historical legacy and social inappropriateness."

Merk was born in a small town in Lithuania. "I didn't fit in. Art was the shortest escape from there, first mentally and then physically," she recalls. She studied in Vilnius then Munich, and has exhibited extensively in both cities as well as in Shanghai. At Independent, Merk is presenting a set of portrait canvases and a smaller still life titled *Eclipse*. These works follow the footsteps of those in Merk's recent exhibitions *SS20*, *Solitaire* and *Стрілецька*, whilst shifting in nuance to a more visually complex vocabulary.



Rute Merk, *Eclipse*, 2021. Oil on linen, 27 x 16 inches (69 x 46 cm), Courtesy of the artist and Downs & Ross, New York Photo: Phoebe D'Heurle



Rute Merk, *Tyrice*, 2021. Oil on linen, 78 3/4 x 55 inches (200 x 140 cm), Courtesy of the artist and Downs & Ross, New York Photo: Phoebe D'Heurle

Merk's approach is noteworthy. The figurative parts of her work are always based on digital materials. For the artist, however, this source imagery is already embedded with complex levels of information and cultural residue. "The process involves two different temporalities. Firstly, a folder of images gets accumulated through luck and attention, whilst studio time is the one of urgency and decisions." As she points out, "Being mediated and already conditional, a photographic digital image is a complex and universal source."

Personal biography, work life and technology are not the only influences on Merk's practice. She is currently drawn to elements of Eastern European social realist painting, as well as the graphic languages and patterns that emerge in nature. Science fiction and gaming are also ongoing inspirations. "It's mainly through my obsession with Aki Ross, a first and iconic digital actress from sci-fi film *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*," Merk explains. "Together with some computer game characters it was an attempt to explore and express human figuration in a post-digital, de-naturalized way."

Her methodology was initially inspired by the work of Luc Tuymans--though aesthetically her work feels very different. His pastel, newspaper-like blur is replaced by Merk's dark, more chiaroscuro approach to portraiture. Alien, atmospheric elements surround her characters. "They represent nothing in particular, but are not without structure. Natural and inhuman patterns are a distant inspiration for these elements," she notes. "I consider it controlled repetition, machine-like movements made by hand, yet de-humanized through blurring and smoothing."

Стрілецька: Rute Merk @ WT Foundation, Kyiv, Ukraine

July 29, 2021 | in Painting



WT Foundation in Kyiv, Ukraine, just closed *Стрілецька (Streletska)*, a solo exhibition of new paintings by Rute Merk which was on view between June 4th and Aug 1st. And after closely following her practice and enjoying her groundbreaking technical approach for some time, we were excited to finally have an opportunity to introduce her exceptional oil paintings. Yes, oil paintings.

At the first glance, Merk's visuals seem to be depicting the 3D renditions of computer game screenshots rather than oil portraits of human subjects. At the moment when many young artists resort to the use of spray paint and airbrush to capture the smoothness of the digital aesthetics, Lithuanian-born and Berlin-based painter decided to work with the oldest and most traditional of tools to convey her concepts and imagery. Placed in an uncanny, timeless scenery built from blurry patterns rather than actual places, her sitters are both flattened while being attributed with elaborate surfaces and accentuated volume qualities. Appearing as if they were abruptly transported into the scene and existing as holograms within their surroundings, they feel exceptionally detached from anything and everything around them.

Using the common digital fragmentation of the image as the structural base for her work, Merk is capable of using her linen support, oil paint, and brush, to construct a range of effective and traditionally uncommon surfaces and effects. Jumping between transparency, blur, plasticity, shine, or the compressed feel of certain sections, her visuals are (I imagine), equally exciting to construct and render as much as they are captivating to examine and decipher. On top of that, such an approach is putting a strong accent on the most impossible light settings and the creation of the screen light illusion, which is in this presentation accentuated with spotlights and darkened walls of the space.

And such a striking choice of classical techniques over contemporary tools is part of a well thought-through concept with which Merk comments on the way that digital imagery interferes with the traditional art and ways of enjoying it. Aware of the way that screen appearance can determine artists' decisions and inform the work's final look, she seems to have decided to push this concept overboard in order to "prove the point". Taking into account the loss of the actual scale or the flattening of the layers or shades while experiencing it on the screen, Merk is entirely embracing the digital possibilities and/or values while masterfully utilizing the long-established methods, materials, and tools. Simultaneously, she is referencing the alienated, artificial, and blurry nature of the digital or social network existence, basically using her seemingly emotionless, numb protagonists to find and depict the classical forms of beauty in virtual or digital reality.

Following their previous presentations by Botond Keresztesi and Christian Newell, this exhibition is continuing the WT Foundation's mission to promote the discovery and appreciation of global contemporary art in Kiev, Ukraine. —*Sasha Bogojev*

Photos by Maksym Bilousov

ART

Rute Merk

This Lithuanian artist, who is now based in Berlin, titled her exhibition at the Downs & Ross gallery “SS20,” after the fashion industry’s standard abbreviation for the spring/summer collections: the gaunt and morose runway walkers of Fashion Week are the subject of her paintings. Her technique combines bleary airbrushing with sharp-edged geometry. In the arresting portrait “Balenciaga, SS20, Look 7,” a crimson rectangle, formed by the exaggerated shoulders of a dress, offsets the ghostly translucence of a bony model’s stern face. Other canvases have a similarly severe tone, with cropped figures striking poses in lurid light, capturing the almost menacing artifice of the fashion show. To contextualize her exhibition, Merk has borrowed a passage from Ling Ma’s superb 2018 zombie novel, “Severance,” which concerns the spread of an infectious disease. “Fashion was beside the point. We didn’t look at a woman to appreciate her outfit, we looked at her to evaluate her potential sickness,” the narrator observes—a perspective in keeping with the exacting apocalyptic chill of Merk’s art.

—*Johanna Fateman*

Jul. 8-Sept. 13

📍 Downs & Ross Online

[Website](#)

ArtSeen

Rute Merk: SS20

The Vitruvian Cyborg

By William Corwin



Rute Merk, *BALENCIAGA, SS20, Look 89*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 86 1/2 x 86 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Downs & Ross, New York. Photo: Daniel Terna.

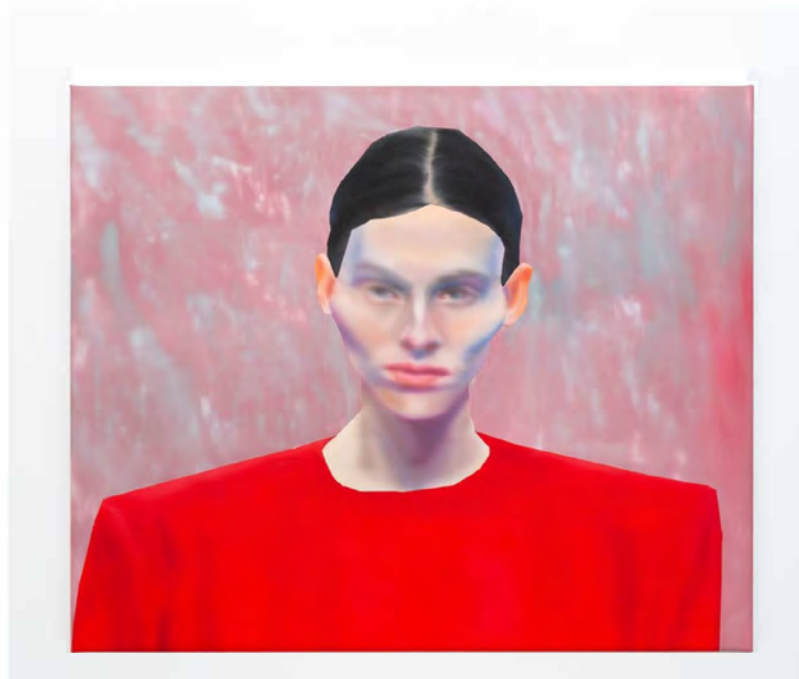
NEW YORK CITY

Downs & Ross

July 8 – September 13,
2020

The seven-and-a-half-foot-square canvas *BALENCIAGA, SS20, Look 89* (2019) by Rute Merk presents a disquieting vision of humanoid perfection: a confident androgyne blue goddess on a blue background. Like the depiction of the Vitruvian man, Merk's model is inscribed in a square and stares out at us blankly. Instead of spreading limbs à la da Vinci or Cesariano, a hoop skirt in blue velvet supplies the diagonals to contrast with the solid verticality of the model's trunk. But the roster of desirable proportional ratios to which the model ascribes has been modified and updated from those of Augustus's obsequious architect almost 2,100 years ago (still, the damage was done the minute he published them). Marcus Vitruvius Pollio's perfect man was invented largely as a source and reference, in nature, for the scaling and proportions of architectural elements and structures like columns, architraves, aqueducts, and basilica. Merk's figures in the exhibition *SS20* are in the service of the fashion industry, and in a larger context are the handmaidens and footmen of Capital. Servants in terms that they are literal personifications of lavish consumption in the service of tremendous profit (Balenciaga grosses over \$1 billion a year), aka the dizzying accretion of

capital. There is the tongue-in-cheek proposition that everyone must wear clothing and it has a use value—but no one needs a \$95 pair of socks. Art on the other hand has no determinate purpose and thus its purchase is a total enigma to most. Merk has chosen this year's summer collection of the fashion house of Balenciaga as her source material, but as in *Look 89* and her other figure studies/portraits, her primary focus is beauty and its looming presence. The artist's portraits examine both the specific and everyman quality of the runway fashion model, and how digital processes have, like all art forms before them, accepted and rejected the capricious notion of human physical perfection. Where Merk truly excels is in her negotiation of painting's appropriation of new modes of seeing. In *SS20* Merk deftly transliterates Fashion's beautiful living mannequins into the digitally rendered, awkward cyborgs we know primarily from first-person-shooter (FPS) games, and renders these beings in traditional oil on canvas.



Rute Merk, *BALENCIAGA, SS20, Look 7*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 27 x 32 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Downs & Ross, New York. Photo: Daniel Terna.

Aesthetically, Merk approaches two juggernaut problems in her work: the choice between engaging the craft, or “analog” practices of painting, without embracing a dull backwards-gazing anachronistic subject matter like nudes or faux-history painting, and dealing with the digital in contemporary painting practice, again without becoming mired in the attendant typical subject matter (video games, VR porn, etc.). Fashion is a highly suitable intersection for an examination of these issues. Apart from the clothes

themselves, which for Merk become another texture to be mapped, fashion sells a standard or implication embodied in human appearance, whether it's beauty, access to power and money, or an exclusive know-how loosely under the heading of coolness. In *BALENCIAGA, SS20, Look 7* (2019), *BALENCIAGA, SS20, Look 7, II* (2020), and *BALENCIAGA, SS20, Look 40* (2020), we are offered a variety of shoulder length portraits with ever-so-slightly indistinct features. High cheekbones, sunken cheeks, and a carefully trained bored and contemptuous look immediately place them as runway models. These are specific individuals whose names we could determine with a little research, but besides sharing that angular "look" that is sought after in the industry, Merk has transformed them into characters in her own FPS game. The chins and noses are negligibly off-kilter as the artist has wrapped the surface bearing the image of the face over a digital skeleton/marionette. What is perceptible, and what Merk really plays with, is the bizarre clipping and angularity of the silhouettes and hairlines. The sfumato brushwork of the faces contrasts with the sharp tape-masked edges of the hard separations between figure and ground, cloth, fiber, and flesh. It's a nod to hard-edged abstraction of the '60s as well as photoreal painting. In the case of the portraits, ill-fitting beautiful skin over an agile but robotic frame is a fertile metaphor for the problematic parasitic relationship between fashion and the human body IRL that leads to side issues and industries such as anorexia nervosa and ubiquitous plastic surgery. The canvasses that depict the legs and torsos of the figures from the front and side, without heads, seem to be addressing fashion in terms of a different allegory than body image, instead interpreting the performance of the walk with more of an insider's perspective—the persistence of a singular brand's style, as it has transitioned, yet in some respects remained consistent, over its more-than-100-year history.



Rute Merk, *SS20/2*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 67 x 78 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Downs & Ross, New York. Photo: Daniel Terna.

The painterly discourse between Merk and CGI is more nuanced. Painting's engagement with technology goes as far back, as do painting and technology, while the problematic back-and-forth with photography and painting has been a constant for the past 150 years. High quality digital rendering, scanning, and imperceptible collaging of imagery has resulted in the rich ooey-gooey hyper-real canvasses of painters such as Richard Patterson and Glenn Brown, and an obsession not with reality but with rendering a rendering of reality. The photorealistic techniques in painting that this has engendered often yield a very seductive, placid flatness and obsession with surface, be it matte or glossy, into which Merk happily buys. The traditionally trained Lithuanian artist creates her own oil paints and clearly enjoys faithfully reproducing the odd manipulations of facial structure that read as eerie distortions, or faces caught in a slight movement, like Max Headroom's tick. Backgrounds, as in the larger figure studies *SS20/1* (2020), *BALENCIAGA, SS20, Look 51 and 61* (2019), and *BALENCIAGA, SS20, Look 16* (2019), also play with the intersection of paint and digitally enhanced special effects, positioning the bodies of the models, sometimes headless and frozen in the jarring clipped runway walk, against glossy expanses of hazy fractals or Aurora Borealis-esque color bursts.

The artist indulges herself and us in perhaps the most sentimental but unequivocally arresting image in the exhibition: *Taihei* (2020). Meaning "peace" in Japanese, the image of a downward facing crescent moon shimmers over a bouquet of what appear to be blue clematis or anemones. The flowers are regurgitated digital entities in the same way as the dour runway models, but there is a palpable psychic decompression accompanying the de-escalation of social signifiers. *SS20* is a commentary on the ubiquity of a specific type of beauty in this post-internet world, the mythologizing of beautiful but otherwise vapid people, and their disorienting ramifications on our society. Despite the perfect phrasing, it is not true that "beauty is truth, truth beauty"; really, it isn't. It is nothing more than an evolutionary gimmick of the selfish gene that is "paid with sighs aplenty/ and sold for endless rue," to which Rute Merk's self-consciously artificial cardboard avatars attest.

Contributor

William Corwin

is a sculptor and journalist from New York. He has exhibited at The Clocktower, LaMama and Geary galleries in New York, as well as galleries in London, Hamburg, Beijing and Taipei. He has written regularly for *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Artpapers*, *Bomb*, *Artcritical*, *Raintaxi* and *Canvas* and formerly for *Frieze*. Most recently he curated and wrote the catalog for *Postwar Women* at The Art Students League in New York, an exhibition of the school's alumnae

active between 1945-65, and *9th Street Club*, and exhibition of Perle Fine, Helen Frankenthaler, Mercedes Matter, Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner and Elaine Dekooning at Gazelli Art House in Mayfair. He is the editor of *Formalism; Collected Essays of Saul Ostrow*, to be published in 2020, and he will participate in the exhibition *Anchor/Roots* at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor Cultural Center in 2021.

ARTFORUM 艺术论坛



Rute Merk, "Cream Horse", 2020, oil on canvas, 205 x 185 cm.

Rute Merk

GALLERY VACANCY

No. 2, Lane 19, Urumqi Middle Road,
Jing'an District, Shanghai
2020.06.13-2020.07.25

On a colorful background, the image of early computer imaging (CGI) floats in abstract nothingness. In this day when this technology is becoming more and more mature, the painter Rute Merk (Rute Merk was born in Lithuania in 1991.) Using painting to reproduce the chaotic low-pixel world of computer technology and the early days of the Internet. The title of the

exhibition "Solitaire" is a Windows built-in game based on the playing card "Solitaire" invented by Microsoft in 1990, which aims to help users familiarize themselves with the operating system and the use of the mouse. The era when individuals entertain themselves in the digital world by themselves has started. The relationship between people and screens has never been so close.

Merk's paintings are precisely a response to the changes in computer technology to people's lifestyles and viewing methods since that period. The images in her paintings, whether they are characters, cream horses or phalaenopsis, are processed with extremely turbulent lines into products like computer animation or PS cutouts. Blurred color blocks, de-detailed performance and flat composition methods all point to the simulacra and simulation after digital technology. A single female figure is a common theme for artists, including models in her "Balenciaga Look" series in collaboration with fashion brand Balenciaga. When the viewer wonders whether the characters whose facial features and expressions are blurred are from reality or entirely from the artist's imagination, they have been successfully captured by Merk. In today's simulation world created by electronic media, the real, original and simulation bring people the same perception and experience, and sometimes simulation is more real than reality itself. With the help of oil painting as a medium, Merk created a kind of "super-real" image, and deliberately roughened it. While breaking the potential distinction between real and virtual, it also suspended the ability of virtual simulation.

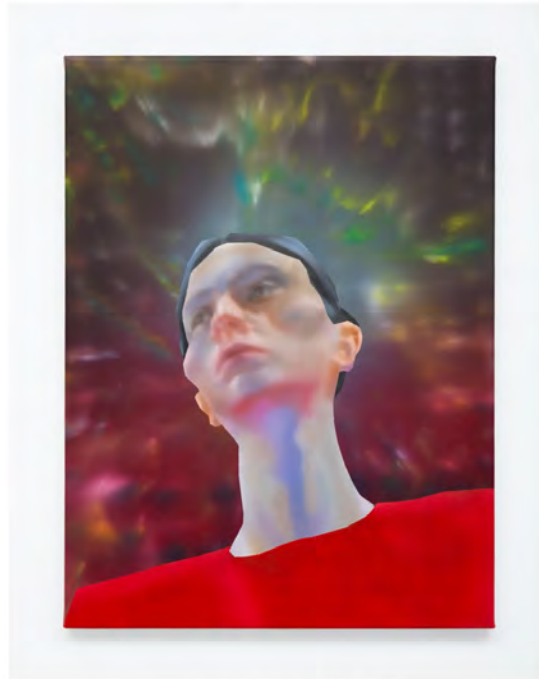
In the 1970s, Gerhard Richter used photographic realism painting to create a unique blur effect and artistic form, injecting another kind of "aura" into the art production in the age of mechanical reproduction; In a sense, Merk's paintings provide a new reference for painting creation and image aesthetics in the digital media era in a similar way. Those illusory backgrounds with flowing light and shadow also remind me of the special connection that may exist with music, especially the electronic music from the late 80s to the early 90s, from "acid house", Dubstep, Downtempo, to "swiftness". "Trip-hop", the blurred experience they create seems to have acquired a visual image in Merk's pen. Dizziness is a feeling that comes after staring at Merk's paintings for a long time, just like people who stare at the screen for too long, immersed in the virtual world and find it difficult to extricate themselves from the perception of reality.

By Li Suchao (Translation: Google)

EDITORIAL

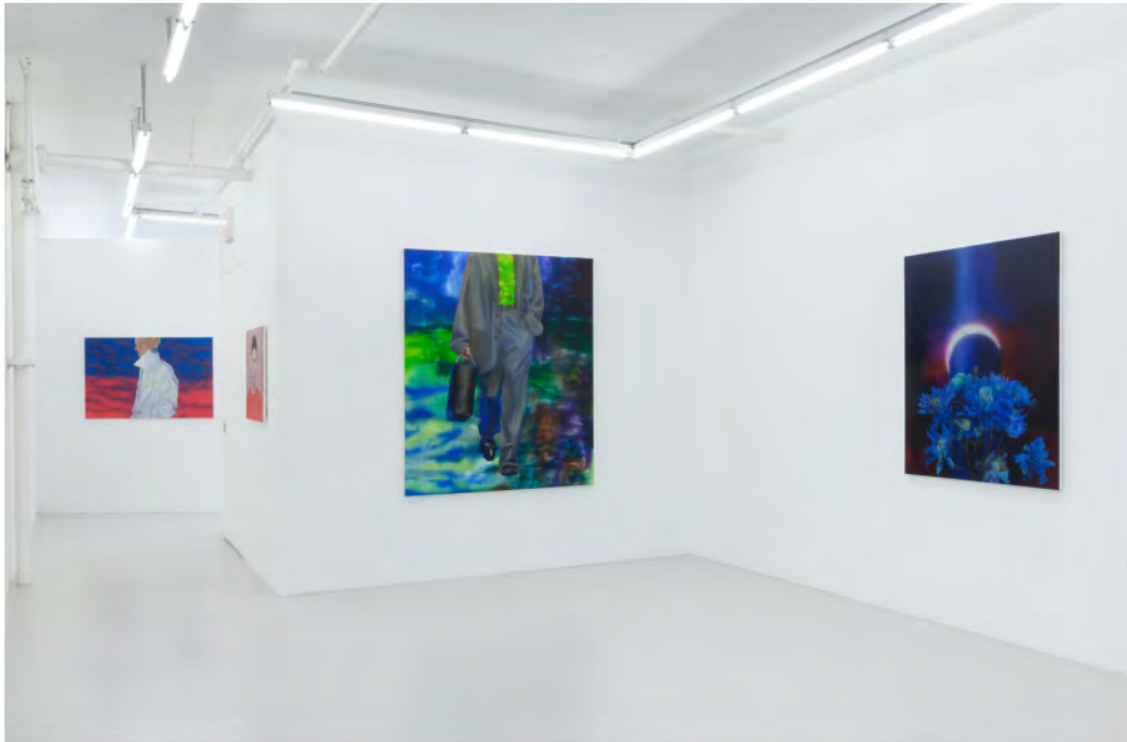
A Conversation with Rute Merk

August 21, 2020



Images courtesy of the artist and Downs & Ross New York
BALENCIAGA, SS20, Look 7 II, 2020, Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 23 1/4 inches

I recently watched *Total Recall* and the *Fifth Element*, both alike in their uniquely 90s vision of the future – hyper-capitalist, police states, fashion, distant riffs on an electric guitar. Fuzzy holograms, laggy connections on video-phones – there's something decrepit about them despite efforts to appear futuristic. Rute Merk's renderings fit into these fictional futures. Merk's paintings are glitchy visions of a consumerist future, a search engine result for "fashion." Smudge-faced androgynous models walk a psychedelic runway in Balenciaga, we can't quite make them out. They're shoddy memory implants, furnished with product placements. Using analogue tools of oil paint and brushes, the Lithuanian-born artist simulates dated computer techniques in her practice. Inspired by the Dutch genre of Tronies (pre-digital stock characters), and video game sprites, Merk's characters are like sims, playing out their realities in a virtual space. The space between a person and their image, is where Rute Merk lingers. What details are lost, or gained, when a person shifts from physical to virtual? She's just completed her collaboration for Balenciaga for SS20, and is now showing the work at Downs & Ross in New York until Sept. 13th. – CM



Given that we've moved online so much in recent months, how has the pandemic influenced your work?

Personally, I felt more dispersed, distracted and dependent on social media. But at the same time it allowed me to keep in touch with family and friends.

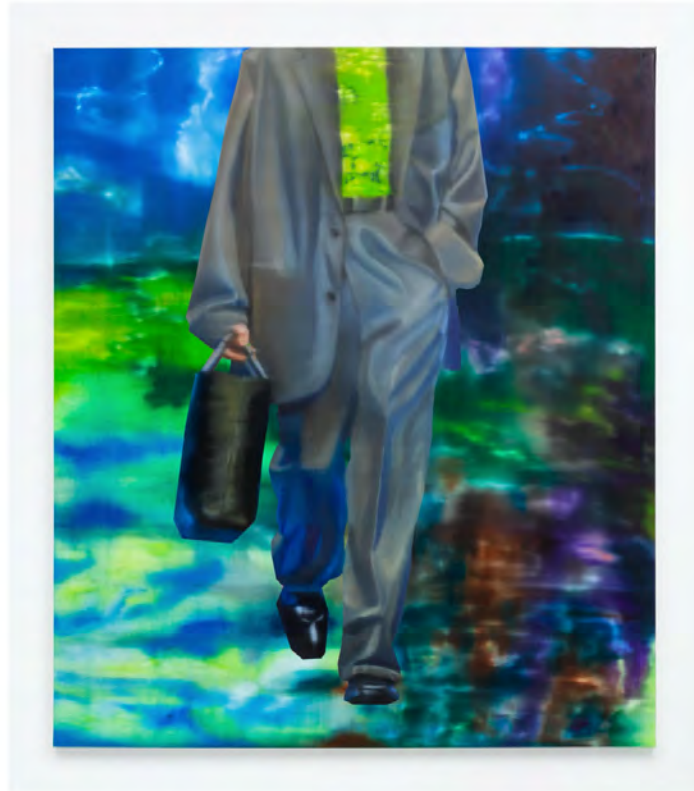
Quarantine amplified experiences of hyper-connectivity and isolation, alienation and social-overexposure. Imagery of figures in relation to technology became more apparent in my recent work.

Can you tell me a bit about your painting practice?

In principle my technique is rather traditional – oil paints, canvas, masking tape. As for effects, I try to assimilate opposite visual registers, say elements of human and machine vision and mark making. This allows me to think about technologized subjectivity.

While being capricious and time consuming oil paint is very versatile. It's produced of minerals, salts, earths, clays, rusts, shells, roots etc. But it can make-appear abstract emotions and ideas.

It hits me differently when I see a printed image and a painted image which pretends to be printed. Not that painting medium is in itself any superior, but it records and reveals other things – the mental imagery, the nerve system, embodied cognition.



BALENCIAGA, SS20, Look 16, 2019
 Oil on canvas
 69 1/2 x 59 inches

Why do you distort your subject's faces?

When painting an object, a figure, a face it is most important to transport a certain hunch I have about that subject. I try to shape it through gestures and colour. A certain amount of distortion is productive and welcome. If I concentrate too much on photographic semblance, that vision fades away and I'm left with a rigid, mechanical, sweaty reproduction.

Is there any difference between our real selves and our online selves?

Authentic online self is just as possible as a fake analog one. But surely there is a difference – our real selves are more vulnerable and marked by death.

Do you worry that we live in a simulation?

Videos of dogs and cats give me so much pleasure, that it's almost worrying.

Can you explain a bit about your inspiration in Tronics?

Tronie (face) is an old Dutch portrait painting depicting stock characters, like a beggar, a fool, an old man, a young woman. It is known that these nameless portraits usually had actual sitters posing for them. I looked for traces of this realness while repainting so-called 'minor characters' from computer games or digital avatars.



BALENCIAGA, SS20, Look 51 and 61 (detail) 2019
Oil on canvas
61×803/4 inches

What do you think is the function of fashion in our new reality?

I guess that despite looming ecological and political crises and pressures, fashion won't be reduced only to these challenges, and a purely aesthetic element will remain important as well.

Do you think the continued virtualization of our lives serves to bring us together or alienate us?

Well, it's precisely both. But generally I try to be not technophobic.

What does the future look like to you?

The biggest anxiety I have now about the future is the shadow of fascisms. The biggest hope is how young generations grow up with the knowledge of ecological catastrophes and take it for real. Overall I'm afraid there's more banality in future than usual futuristic enthusiasm would like to accept.

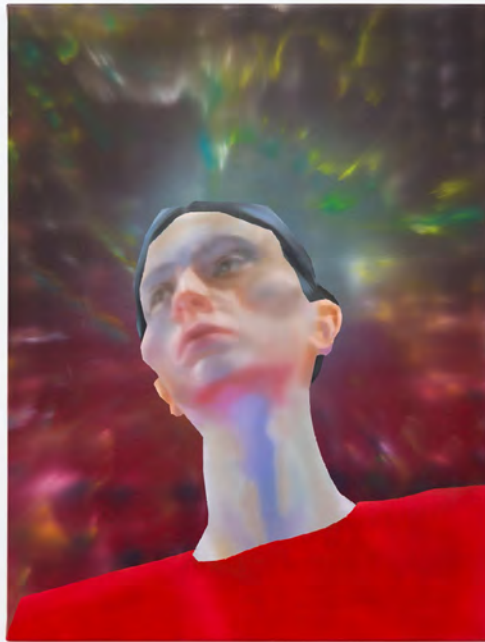


Taihei
2020
Oil on canvas
52 × 41 inches



GALLERY | AUGUST 14, 2020 | PAUL LASTER

Figurative and Abstract Paintings Brighten NY Galleries



COURTESY DOWNS & ROSS, NEW YORK.

Rute Merk, Balenciaga, SS20, Look 7 II.

Rute Merk: SS20

Downs & Ross

July 8 – September 13, 2020

Mimicking the look of digitally designed avatars in early role-playing video games, Rute Merk draws fuzzy lines and paints people in layers of thinned down pigments to give a sci-fi feel to her strange yet fashionable figures. Creating androgynous characters and creatures inhabiting digital realms, the Lithuanian-born, Berlin-based artist has been exhibiting internationally for the past few years with notable results.



COURTESY DOWNS & ROSS, NEW YORK

Installation view of *Rute Merk: SS20* at Downs & Ross, New York.

For most of the canvases on view in her current show, Merk collaborated with the fashion house of Balenciaga to create a portfolio of dreamlike images that was published in the Italian contemporary art magazine *Mousse* earlier this year. Dressed in Balenciaga's chic outfits, Merk's imaginary models, who possess the looks of the typically stylish, high-cheekbone runway personas, traverse the ether space of the Internet to who knows where. Painting the human figure as a "spiritual being in the context of technological advancement, physical us in the context of virtual existence," Merk makes art that looks as though it would be perfectly at home hanging on the walls of the captain's quarters on *Starship Enterprise*—a feat that many may have envisioned, but few—like Merk—have actually accomplished.

Noah Becker's

WHITEHOT MAGAZINE

of contemporary art

Phantom Body: Weightless bodies, Avatars, and the end of skin



Rute Merk. Maeve. Oil on canvas. 50.5 x 37 inches. 2019

By **ANDREW PAUL WOOLBRIGHT**, April 2020

Within figuration, the materiality of oil paint has been bound to its relationship to the depiction of skin. Velasquez went so far as to say that if not for skin, oil painting wouldn't exist. This preoccupation has been typically mapped through Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* (1655), then Soutine's (1925), then depending on taste- Bacon, Freud, and currently Saville. The figural connection to skin was one of weight, of a physicality channeled through hog hair brushes and piles of flake white caked to the surface of the canvas. This obsession with material skin seems to have lost its privileged position due in no small part to how incredibly realized it's been within the traditions of western art history. There is a completeness to Freud's *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995) and Saville's surgical portraits that followed, that have made contemporary artists disregard flesh, instead pursuing a frontier that investigates the body as one that is weightless, boneless, hollow, thin, and digital- phantom bodies.

Prior to the internet, the body was always and inescapably present. Religion and mythology alone allowed for the rare dispossession of muscle and skin. The Egyptians imagined the soul as *ka*, an ephemeral copy of our bodies that could be operated within the zones of the afterlife upon the point of death. Christianity developed a similar understanding of an externalized body image in its concept of the soul; eternity would be explored and understood through an intangible copy of our body, which could be tortured in hell but painless and incorporeal in heaven.

It was the job and work of philosophy to separate the rational mind, the *logos*, from the carnal nature of the body, the *corpus*, influenced in part by the writings of St. Augustine and the church's need to reject Epicurean pleasure. Aesthetically, it was Michelangelo that saw the carnality of the body as its entry point to the divine. Endlessly copying and studying the Belvedere Torso, he "scattered it across the universe" according to Henri Fuseli in a lecture given at the Royal Academy. Michelangelo understood that the torque found in the core of the body, the mass and twisting weight of it, had the ability to connect to the viewer through a sort of physical empathy. The turning flesh operated as an affective vehicle, twisting the viewer's own body and making them complicit to the spiritual experience of Catholicism through their own muscle

In most philosophy before the 20th century, the mind was pure and always hindered by the limitations of the body. It wouldn't be until the thinking of Merleau-Ponty that the two would be thought of not in binary terms, but as coexisting forces in our sense of corporeality; the two being inseparable and collaborative in our creation of the body image.

Much of this shift in linking the mind and body came from the psychoanalytic work of Freud and early research into phantom limbs. The body disconnected through war and trauma, specifically that of World War I, taught us about the mind's ability and need to visualize itself. It was the rift in the totality of our form that taught us its nature- that the mind stores the sensations of touch and movement as it does them. The mind stores lines of coded sensations for our body to utilize during future actions, so much so that even when an arm is gone, the patient can feel it reaching for an object and grasping. Like a computer running maintenance checks, the phantom limb can still feel an invisible itch.

As philosophy reorders itself around a post-human and ecological understanding of being, and as the art world has subsumed the anti-art aesthetics of post-internet, the core and mass of the twisting body, the depiction of flesh rendered in thick oil paint, has lost itself to the digital body- the avatar. The body has shifted experience from the twisting core of the belvedere torso to the fingertips; and the mind and body are once again separate. The body has become weightless, lost presence, has entered into a sphere of endless modification, anonymity, endless persona, and into worlds of saved games and respawn points. What could previously only be imagined at the point of death, the experience of *ka* or the Christian soul, is now experienced by anyone experiencing a video game; an experience that allows for the experience of death, of trial and error, in virtual worlds that lack consequence.

In *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective*, Hito Steyerl imagines that the unifying result of one point perspective has been replaced with the topographical view. Our relation as bodies to the landscape is no longer to the horizon, but instead, to the vertical angle of the drone or the skyscraper; the body in freefall. But I would argue that the body, regardless of its political free fall, is weightless. It is not a body of bones and flesh, but one of empty space. "Skin" is an out-turned image directed and curated for the player. It is now a body without skin, one that can float above the virtual world or sink below its surface, the body that can see the map from any angle by pressing up or down on the keyboard, or experience object/body confusion through glitch. Skin and its materiality within painting seems outmoded.

There are a few variations on phantom bodies within current painting, all of which decline to engage in western art history's relationship between flesh and paint.

Rendered skin

A group of artists have left the physical body behind and exchanged it for the virtual model. Emma Stern downloads open source 3D models of illegally young girls, overtly sexualized by their anonymous designers. Stern takes these models and attempts to give them personhood- naming them and introducing them into invented environments. At times they are chimeric- integrating animals and objects into their own 3D skin in a way that is in line with Haraway's concept of a Cyborgian feminine. Similarly, there is Rute Merk, who is using paint to reinvestigate what seems like polygonal characters from early Playstation games. Their low res limitations are transformed by her soft, romantic brushy treatment- they are done with such gravitas and commitment that we are forced to consider them as subjects rather than dispensable. One can almost imagine a court painter living inside of a video game, Velasquez painting in pixels.

Predecessors to this rendered skin could be the likes of George Tooker or Alex Colville, artists that imagined rubberized cartoon worlds devoid of tactility, exchanged for psychological drama and force.

Sensual bodies: the skin that feels, subject/object confusion

Within this group, the surface of skin is a placeholder for other material. Owing perhaps to predecessors like Judith Linhares, who preferred channeling De Kooning over feeling any particular debt to the body, these are painters who are thinking of a seductive body, a body that feels, experiences pleasure and sensuality without needing a patriarchal presence. There is Sarah Slapppy, who's rubberized, boneless figurations snake like ropes of sexual bubble gum. The hands and fingers in her painting wind and slip through each other, enjoying their own touch. It is a skin of pleasure that indulges in itself, voyeuristic to itself, feeling every shadow and curvature in its makeup. It is auto-erotic, self-indulgent, and free of the voyeuristic gaze in search of a feminist Surrealism.

Also within this resurgent Surrealism, is work that explores body-object confusion, found within the works of Katherina Olschbaur and Robin Williams. This is a skin of replacement, that reflects its material surroundings back towards the space it inhabits, confusing the delineation of subject and object and the space it occupies. As object oriented ontology and Latour's Actor Network Theory have occupied the the stage of contemporary thought, so too have artists worked to blur the boundaries of skin, removing its bones, and introduce it into materialist play.

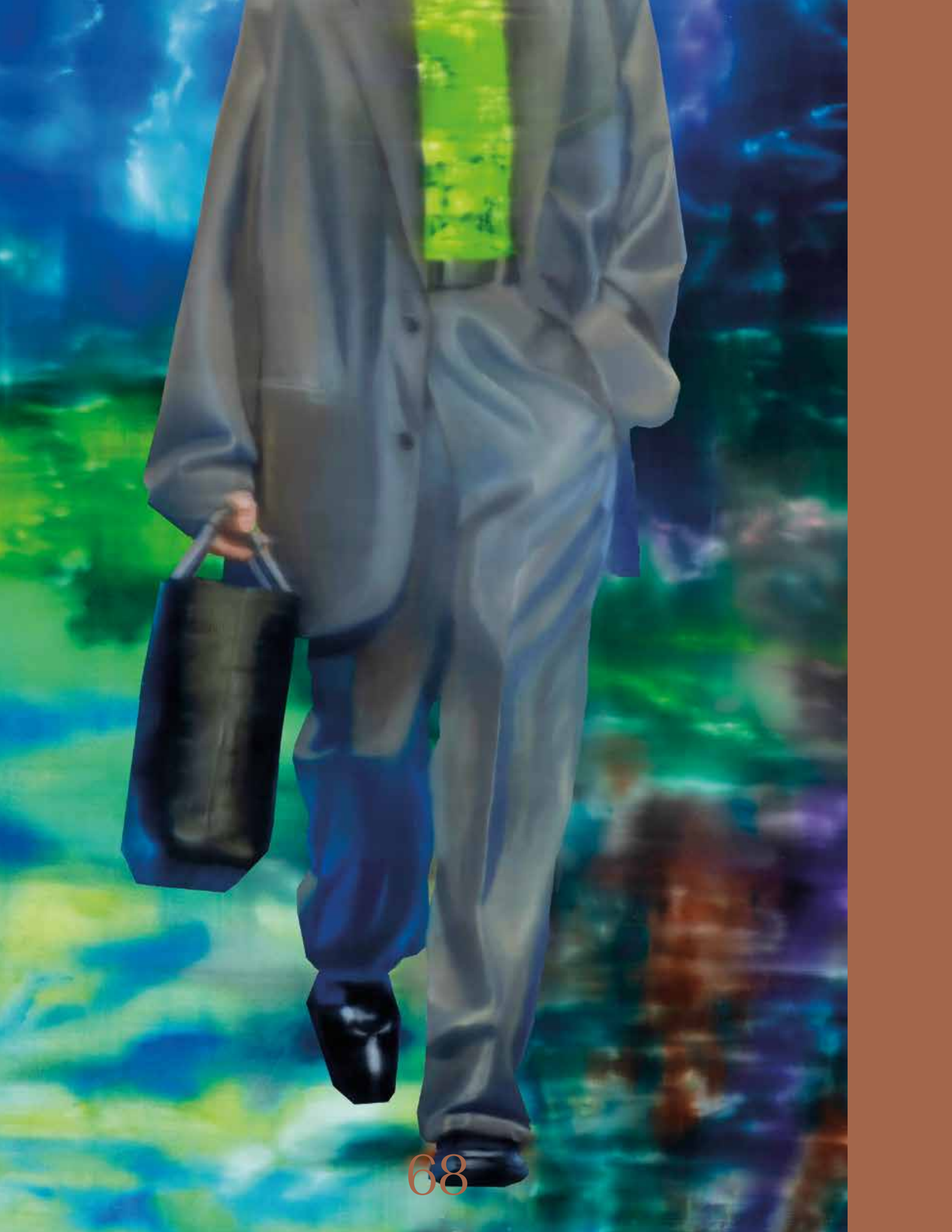
Hollow bodies

This is a group of artists who explore the figure dematerializing in the landscape. Starting back as early as William Blake, who wanted his figures to appear hollow to advance his concepts of ecology (and out of his hatred of the concrete forms of Joshua Reynolds), these are artists who's backgrounds compete and fight with the foreground. Angela Dufresne creates these queer and combative spaces. The background won't take its domination by the subject lying down. Instead, it fights past the figure, the two form a phenomenological mesh, as the figuration is developed by the space it inhabits-pushing through to the positive. The figures and landscape are at times indecipherable, ecological; creating an electric soup. Caitlin Cherry similarly shows a body affected by its environment, and her work floats between the sensual body and the hollow as she flexes her expert handling of color and camouflage.

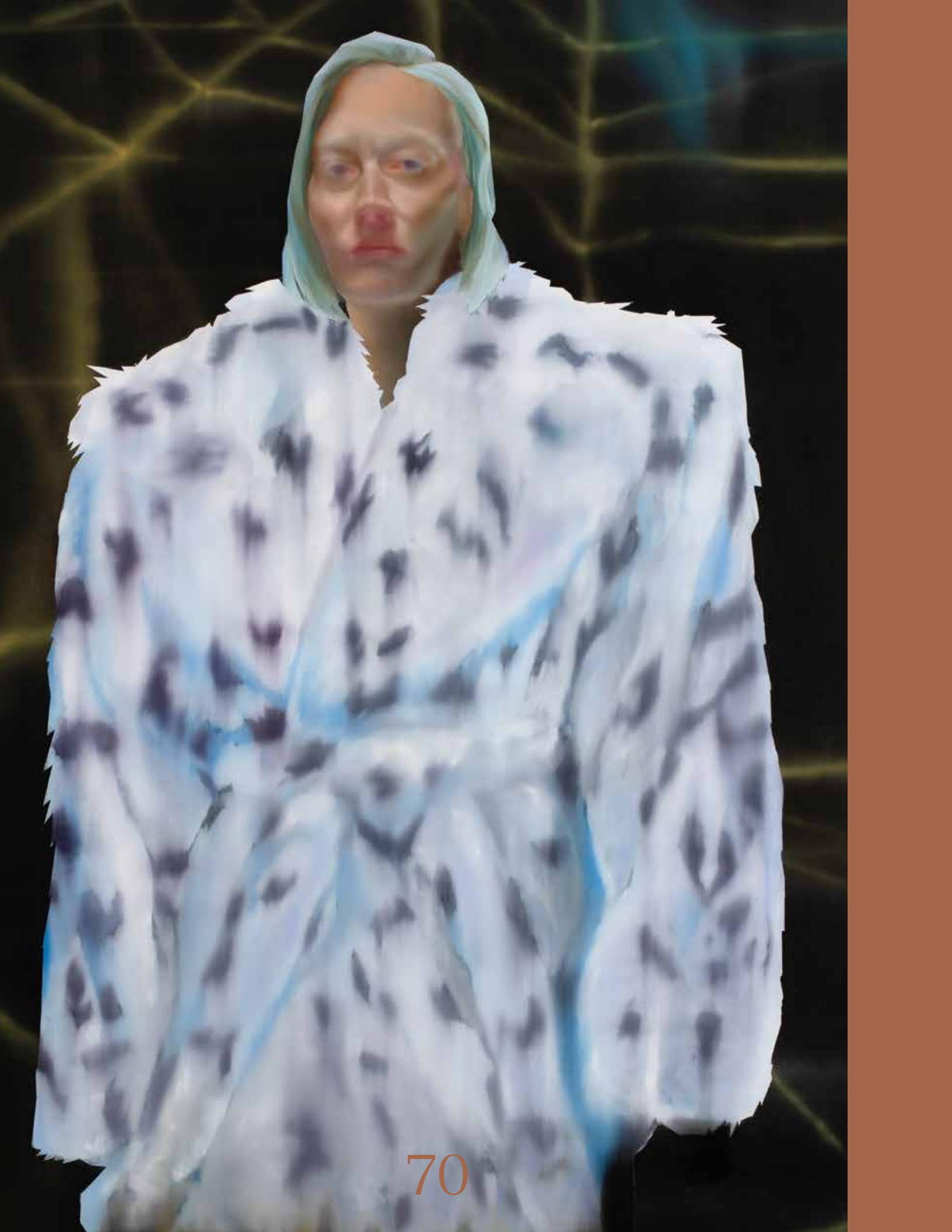
The term digital was first used in the 15th century. It referred to calculations that could be done using your ten fingers, a knowledge understood at the edges of your body. The way we speak of screens and the internet is inseparable from the constraints and understandings of the physical body, our language for it remains physical and corporeal. As the mind is freed from the weight of the body, it discovers its phantom form- finding its weightless footing in endless virtual space. **WM**

A Visual Project
by Rute Merk

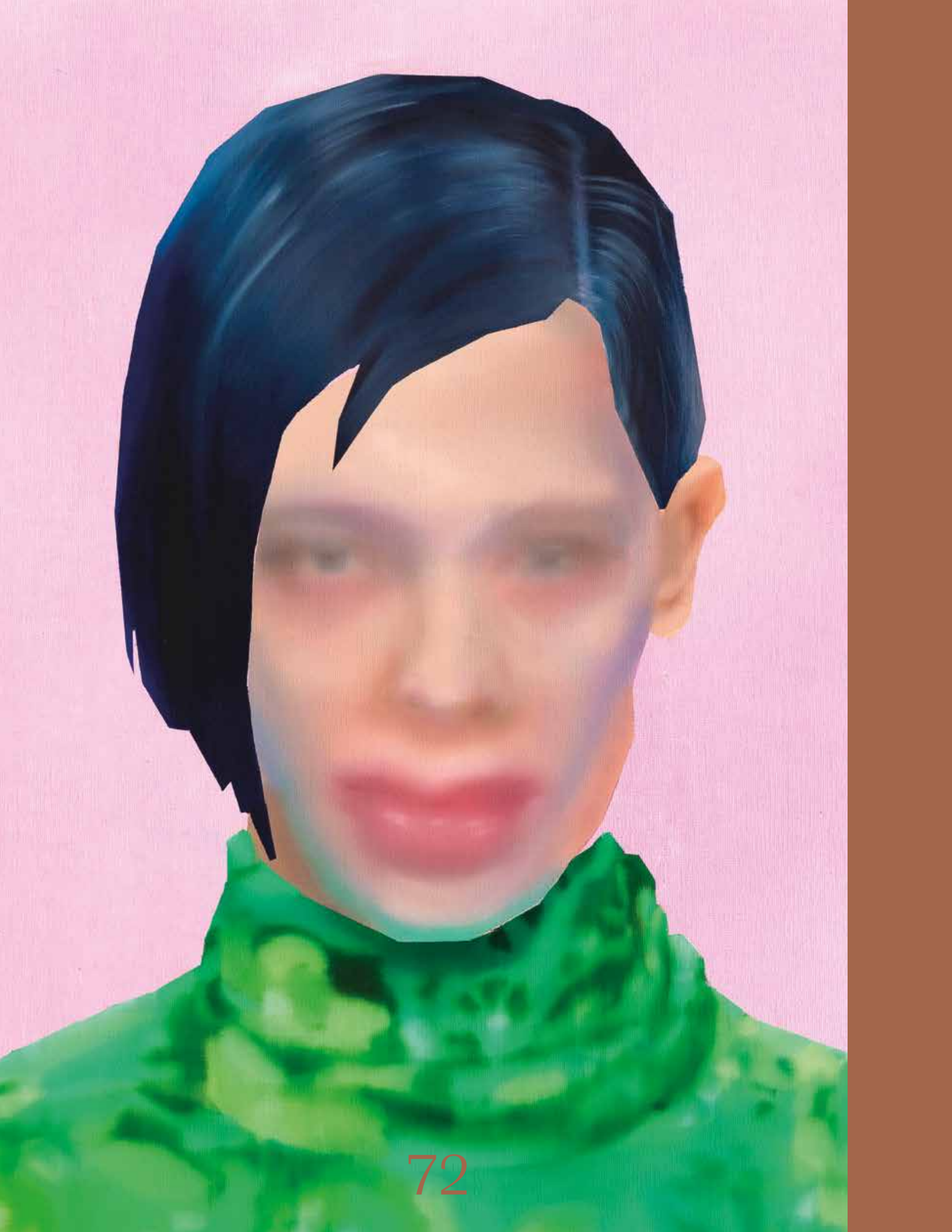
BALENCIAGA FOR MOUSSE













(All images) Courtesy: the artist and BALENCIAGA
Photo: Frank Sperling

RUTE MERK (b. 1991, Vilnius) lives and works in Berlin. She received her art education at Akademie der bildenden Künste, Munich; Edinburgh College of Art; and the Vilnius Art Academy. Selected solo exhibitions include Gallery Vacancy, Shanghai (forthcoming); Downs & Ross, New York (2019); Editorial, Vilnius (2018). Among group shows Kunstverein München, Munich (2019); Rupert, Vilnius (2018); CAC Vilnius (2017); Vartai Gallery, Vilnius (2017); Art Hall Tallinn, Tallinn (2017); 427 Gallery, Riga (2016). The artist is represented by Downs & Ross, New York.



RŪTĖS MERK

XXI a. portretų galerija

AISTĖ PAULINA VIRBICKAITĖ

Rūtė Merk (g. 1991) – jauna šiuo metu Berlyne gyvenanti tapytoja. 2018 m. nedidelė jos personalinė paroda buvo rodoma Vilniuje, projektų erdvėje „Editorial“, o pernai jos parodą surengė (ir visus joje buvusius paveikslus pardavė) solidi Niujorko meno galerija. Bet papasakoti apie Rūtę noriu ne dėl tarptautinio CV. Kelias, kurį ne taip seniai aptiko menininkė, intriguoja ir gali tapti ilga įdomia kelione po skaitmeninį pasaulį, kuriame ši Y kartos atstovė jaučiasi natūraliai jaukiai. Bet gaudydama virtualių personažų sielas pasitelkia senąsias technologijas – teptuką ir aliejinį dažus.

Prieš pradėdant pasakoti apie menininkę, lietuvių skaitytojui turbūt reikėtų paaiškinti, kaip atsirado šis kiek neįprastai skambantis vardas. Rūtė Merk – Rūtenės Merkliopaitės meninis vardas, kurio atsiradimą menininkė aiškina taip:

„Vardo Rūtenė trumpoji forma yra Rūtė, taip mane visada vadino artimiausioje aplinkoje. Prie savo pavardės nesu prisirišusi, jos istorija gana keista. Mano senelio pavardė buvo Merkys, tačiau į santuokos liudijimą neblaivus sovietų pareigūnas įrašė „Merklipos“. Atsiradus progai, mielai pavardę re-redagavau. Sutrumpintas vardas ir pavardė padeda neprarasti bendravimo spontaniškumo būnant bet kur užsienyje, nes prisistačius nebereikia kartoti net ir lietuviui neįprastai skambančios pavardės. Manau, kad Andrew Warholas kažkada priėjo prie panašių išvadų.“

Lietuvoje tapytoja dažnai vadinama tikruoju (ilguoju) vardu ir pavarde, kas visai suprantama. Tačiau kiek pasvarsčiusi nusprendžiau tekste vartoti jos pasirinktą meninį vardą – pratinkimės.

Atpažįstami, bet nepažinūs herojai

Raseiniuose gimusi mergina tiksliai pasirinko Vilniaus dailės akademiją, Tapybos katedrą. Tame tapybos lauke ji nepritapo, vienas dėstytojų net pareiškė, kad „tapybai ji neturi duomenų“. Užuoat mėginusi susitaikyti ir prisitaikyti, Rūtė kūrybinio veiksmo ir įkvėpimo ieškojo konceptualaus meno ratuose. Tapyti nenustojo. Manau, įdomu žvilgtelėti į du dar Vilniuje sukurtus paveikslus „Dovydas“ ir „Greta (Aki Ross)“ (abu 2015 m.).

„Dovydas“ vaizduoja Florencijos menininko Andrea del Verrocchio (1435–1488) bronzinę Dovydo skulptūrą. Atvaizdo atvaizdas VDA Tapybos katedros auklėtinių kūryboje yra dažnai naudojama strategija. Bet retrospektyviai žvelgiant jis įdomesnis, nes nurodo posūkį šiandieninių menininkės temų link. Pirmą – populiari versija, kad Dovydo modeliu buvo tuo metu pas Verrocchio mokėsis jaunas gražuolis Leonardo da Vinci. Tai sužinoję akimirksniu nustojame galvoti apie šią dieną mums tokį tolimą Izraelio karalių ir pradėdami atvaizde ieškoti renesanso genijaus. Žinoma, abiem atvejais iš tiesų žiūrime



į tapybą. Antra – pati skulptūra: Dovydo šypseną rėmina lengvos garbanos, kūnas laibas ir kiek mergaitiškas, poza primena šiandieninių manekenių stovėseną, dailūs drabužiai (ak, kada gi pagaliau vyrai pradės dažniau dėvėti sijonus, jie taip jiems tinka!). Rūtės Dovydas vaizduojamas tik iki grakščių šlaunų, o nugalėto milžino Galijoto galva paslėpta. Jei ne pavadinime paliktas vardas, žiūrovui būtų nelengva

apsispręsti, kurios lyties personažas pavaizduotas. Menininkės Dovydas patrauklus ir androginiškas. Savas, nes žmogus. Svetimas, nes lytis, nuotaika, istorija nenuskaitomi.

Paveikslas „Greta (Aki Ross)“ kažkuo panašus. 2015-ųjų darbe jautriais ekspresionistinėmis potėpiais nutapyta figūra taip pat neturi akcentuotų lyties požymių. Pavadinimas šį kartą sufleruoja, kad tai – moteris, bet ji laisva ir tvirta, kovotojos laikysena. Ir dar – ji nėra žmogus! Aki Ross yra filmo „Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within“ (2001) herojė – viena pirmųjų virtualių (fotorealistiškai kompiuterių sukurtų) aktorių. Taigi, vėl – lyg ir įprastinis portretas, bet žvelgiame į fikciją, ne į kūną. Tai intriguoja. Niekas taip nesukuria intrigos, kaip įtampa. Įtampą kuria konfliktas. Kuo tas konfliktas subtilesnis, tuo ilgiau žiūrovas užtrunka prie atvaizdo mėgindamas jį perprasti. Rūtės paveiksluose trikdo atpažįstamo, bet nepažinaus atvaizdo problema. Išvažiavusi studijuoti į Miuncheną, ji intrigą paveiksluose dar sustiprino tapybinėmis priemonėmis.

Ar būtina

atpažinti personažą?

Įdomu palyginti 2015-ųjų ir 2018-ųjų Aki Ross portretus. Personažas, kompozicija tie patys, tačiau plastika gerokai pasikeitusi. „Studijos Miunchene paskatino plastinės kalbos vystymąsi iš dalies ir dėl aktyvesnio, gausesnio su tapyba susijusio srauto. Miunchene, Berlyne „gyvai“ pamačiau daug naujų parodų, naujos (ir senos) tapybos, pradedant Gerhardu Richteriu, Miriam Cahn, Florianu Süssmayriu, Avery Singer, Austinu Lee ir baigiant Rembrandtu ar Bruegelium“, – pasakoja Rūtė. Pagaliau suradusi savitą kalbą ir temą, ji pastaruosius porą metų nuosekliai kuria XXI a. portretų galeriją, kurioje apie šiandienos gyvenimą nebyliai pasakoja skaitmeninio pasaulio vaizdiniai, užfiksuoti „dinozaurišku“ metodu – aliejiniais dažais drobėje.



Kaip vieną šių portretų inspiracijų tapytoja įvardija XVI–XVII a. olandų ir flamandų tapyboje paplitusį portreto žanrą „tronie“ (to meto olandų kalboje šis žodis reiškė veidą). Tai portretinės studijos, kuriose vaizduojami žmonės neįprastomis veido išraiškomis ar įdomiais kostiumais. Kitaip nei įprastiniai reprezentaciniai portretai, šie nėra užsakomieji, vaizduojamasis asmuo lieka anonimu. Tai gali būti senis ar vaikas, tyro grožio įsikūnijimas ar girtuoklėlis, besivaipantis ar natūraliai keistų bruožų asmuo, turintis kažką, kas patraukė menininko žvilgsnį. Vieni žymiausių „tronių“ – Vermeerio „Mergina su perlo auskaru“ arba puiki Franso Halso Harlemono ragana „Malle Babbe“. Vis dėlto, galvodama apie Rūtės Merk paveikslus, prisiminiau XVI–XVII a. LDK valdovų, didikų ir



bajorų portretus. Vyrai ir moterys juose pavaizduoti statiškomis pozomis, visu ūgiu arba iki pusės. Jie neatrodo „kaip gyvi“: jų išraiškos ir povyzos neturi ryškaus individualumo, kūnai nežvelgiamai pasislėpę kostiumuose. Apie kai kuriuos beveik nieko nežinome, nebent vardą ir titulą. Jie truputį juokingi, bet vis viena žvelgiame į juos švelniai, kaip į kokių niekada nematytus tolimus gimines – juk savi. Rūtės tapomi kompiuterinių žaidimų ar filmų herojai kažkuo panašūs: jie keistoki, beveik nieko apie juos nežinome, bet kartu jie – savi. Tik bajorai senuose paveiksluose gyvena istorijoje, o Rūtės paveikslų herojai – virtualioje erdvėje. Ir vieni, ir kiti randa vietos mūsų mintyse, o kartais ir širdyse. Niekada nesusitiksim, bet jie bus mūsų gyvenimo dalimi.

Bet ar nutapytas mums nežinomas XVII a. bajoras yra tikresnis už nutapytą kompiuteriu sukurtą filmo personažą daktarę Aki Ross, stebuklingų galių turintį Michaelo Jacksono personažą iš klipo „Do you remember the time“ arba Lilu iš filmo „Penktasis elementas“? Iš esmės taip, tačiau jausmai ir emocinis ryšys su tais virtualiais personažais sakytų ką kita. Jei tik kontaktas su jais buvo įvykęs, žinoma. Neabejoju, kad daliai šio teksto skaitytojų nieko nesako nei Aki Ross, nei Lilu, nei kitų Rūtės personažų vardai ar istorijos. Lygiai kaip daliai jaunesnių žmonių šiandien nieko nesako mitologinių ar biblinių veikėjų vardai ir ikonografija. Galvodama apie tai, paklausiau Rūtės, ar žiūrovas turėtų atpažinti jos vaizduojamus personažus. „Vieno teisingo pamatymo nėra. Juk tapydama paveikslą taip pat interpretavau turimą informaciją, medžiagą, motyvą. Matymas yra intelektualus veiksmas, visi matome skirtingai. Žinoma, norėčiau, kad žiūrintysis galėtų pamatyti taip, kaip pamačiau pati. Bet man įdomiausia, kai žiūrovas pamato kažką daugiau negu aš. Taip nutinka labai dažnai ir rodo, ne kokie įdomūs yra darbai, bet žmonės“, – atsakė Rūtė. Ji supranta šią figūrų tapymo meno personažų atpažįstamumo problemą ir pati renkasi vaizduoti tai, su kuo atranda emocinį ryšį, jai svarbu susižavėjimo momentas. Kita vertus, paveikslas visada svarbesnis nei tai, kas jame vaizduojama, – prie to prisideda menininko plastiniai spendimai.





Nutapyti virtualią sielą

Šiandien vis dažniau vaizdai (tarp jų ir meno kūriniai) plinta skaitmeniniu būdu. Instagrame ar kitose platformose kūrinius žiūrime, vertiname, perkame. Tai kartais lemia ir menininkų plastinius sprendimus – kuriama galvojant, kaip efektingai rezultatas atrodys ekrane, neperteikiančiame mastelio, tapybinių sluoksnių ir atspalvių, faktūros. Visgi Rūtės Merk paveiks-lai pagavesni žvelgiant į juos „gyvai“. Vėlgi – dėl įtampos.

Iš pradžių gali pasirodyti, kad glotnūs Rūtės Merk paveikslų tapybiniai paviršiai sukurti purškiant dažus. Be to, žvelgiant į paveikslą iš arti, kyla įspūdis, kad atskiros jo dalys yra tiksliai iškirptos ir priklijuotos prie drobės. Atrodo, kad portretas sudurstyta iš skirtingų fragmentų: veidas, plaukai, kostiumų detalės lyg iš kažkur paimti ir „copy-paste“ uždėti vienas ant kito.

Menininkė kantriai teptuku ir aliejiniais dažais kuria tai, ką nuolat daro šiuolaikinis žmogus: vieną ant kitos klijuoja fragmentiškas gautos informacijos eilutes, koreguoja skaitmeninius atvaizdus ir, žinoma, iš pasirinktų gabaliukų lipdo savo tapatybę socialiniuose tinkluose (nors žvelgiant į kai kurias istorijas instagrame pradeda atrodyti, kad kai kuriems ribos tarp socialinės virtualios ir privačios asmeninės erdvės jau visai nebežymios). Vaizdinių, informacijos ir mąstymo fragmentiškumas – mūsų gyvenimo būdas. Šioje vietoje Rūtė pasuka netikėtą kryptimi, dėl kurios jos kūryba ir yra tokia įdomi. Ji netiria ir nekritikuoja išsifragmentavusios šiandienos realybės. Ji ieško realumo pėdsakų skaitmeniniuose vaizduose. Bando parodyti, kad tai nebanalu ir tikra. Galbūt net, kaip poetiškai sako pati menininkė, mėgina surasti virtualaus atvaizdo sielą.



Rūtė Merk's Twenty-first-century Portrait Gallery

AISTĖ PAULINA VIRBICKAITĖ

Rūtė Merk (b. 1991) is a young painter currently living in Berlin. In 2018, a small solo exhibition of her was shown in the project space “Editorial” in Vilnius, and last year her exhibition was hosted (and all of her paintings sold) at the renowned art gallery in New York. But I want to tell you about it not because of the artist's growing international resume. The path taken by the artist not long ago is intriguing and has the potential to become a long and exciting journey through the digital world, where this representative of generation Y feels naturally comfortable. But to capture the souls of virtual characters she uses old technologies – brushes and oil paint.

Born in Raseiniai, the artist purposefully found herself in the Painting Department of Vilnius Academy of Arts. She did not fit in that field of painting, one of the professors even stated that “she is not fit for painting”. Instead of trying to reconcile and adapt, Rūtė sought creative action and inspiration in conceptual art circles. She did not stop painting. And “the studies in Munich have stimulated the development of the plastic language, partly because of the more active, abundant flow associated with painting. In Munich and Berlin, I saw many new exhibitions “live”, of new (and old) painting,” says Rūtė Merk. Having finally found a distinctive language and theme, over the last couple of years she has been consistently creating a 21st-century portrait gallery. It features silent images of the digital world telling about today's life, captured by the “dinosaur” – oil paint on canvas.

One of the inspirations for these portraits, according to the painter, has been the portrait genre “tronie”, which was used in Dutch and Flemish painting in the 16th and 17th centuries (the word used to mean *face* in Dutch at that time). These were portrait studies depicting people with unusual facial expressions or fun costumes. Unlike conventional representational portraits, these were not ordered, and the depicted person remained anonymous.

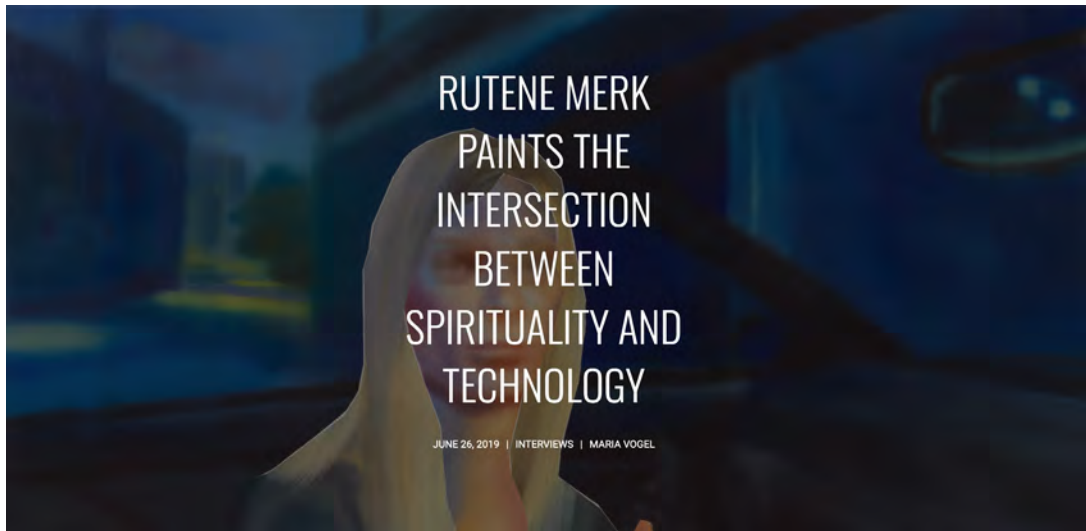
Still, thinking of Rūtė Merk's paintings, I remembered portraits of the rulers and noblemen of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania of the 16th – 17th centuries. Men and women were depicted in static postures, full height or half the height. They did not look “alive”: their expressions and postures lacked distinct individuality, their bodies hidden

behind costumes. Computer games or movies' characters painted by Rūtė are somewhat similar: they are strange, we know almost nothing about them, but at the same time, they are familiar. While the nobility in the old paintings lives in history, the heroes of Rūtė's paintings live in virtual space. Both find space in our thoughts and sometimes in our hearts.

Today, images (including works of art) are increasingly spreading digitally. On Instagram or other platforms, we look at, rate, and buy works of art. This sometimes also results in artists' plastic decisions when it comes to how effective the result will look on the screen, which does not convey the scale, paint layers and shades, or texture. Still, Rūtė Merk's paintings are received better by looking at them “live”. Again – because of the tension.

At first, it may appear that the smooth surfaces of Rūtė Merk's paintings were created by spray painting. In addition, looking at the painting at close range, it gives the impression that its individual parts are precisely cut and pasted onto the canvas. With her brush and oil paint, the artist creates what the modern man does all the time: she overlays fragmented lines of received information, adjusts digital images, and, of course, from selected pieces shapes her own identity on social networks.

Fragmentation of images, information, and thinking is our way of life. However, the artist does not investigate or criticize the fragmented reality of today. She looks for traces of reality in digital images. She tries to show that it is real and not banal. Perhaps even, as she poetically says, she is trying to find the soul of a virtual image.



RUTENE MERK'S paintings look and feel like nothing else that has come before her. The Lithuanian-born, German-based artist uses the centuries-old medium of oil on canvas in a wholly new way to depict abstract figuration. Her works feel as related to computers and technology as they do spiritual and other-worldly. Having recently come off a widely successful U.S. solo debut with her exhibition *SPRITES* at Downs & Ross, we caught up with Merk to discuss her practice and this moment in her career.

What is your background with painting? When did it first enter your life?

A serious relationship with painting practice began when I started studying at Vilnius Academy of Art.

But my mom tells this: I started drawing as soon as I could hold a pen in my hand.

I remember drawing being my favorite thing to do when I was a child, and people around would be surprised by how lifelike my doodles looked.

So I think I entered life through drawing, because it was something I felt amused by and confident in doing.

What stories does your work tell?

Perhaps it's more like fragments of one big story which is still being created.

It is about human as a spiritual being in the context of technological advancement, physical us in the context of virtual existence.

I'm interested in the space between a person and their image. An image simultaneously is a document and distortion.

All this happens in the context of painting, all the fragments and tropes are brought into speech on the canvas. A very important story for me is painting history, and I will my visual language to be conscious of it too.

Who are the figures in your works?

Firstly I have a few "role models:" for example a bronze statue created in the Renaissance by Andrea del Verrocchio. It depicts the ubiquitous biblical hero David, although what interests me also is that it is speculated that Leonardo da Vinci had posed for this sculpture as he was a student in Verrocchio's workshop at the time statue was made.

Or, Dr. Aki Ross – a computer-animated actor created by video game designer Hironobu Sakaguchi.

I also have some anonymous characters, some bits of different images and renders of persons I fuse together. In the end it is hard to explain who is who exactly.

Most of the time, figures in my paintings get animated through resemblance to somebody I would know, someone I feel connected to. For this reason I frequently depict female characters or entities that are hardly defined.

Though your work is created in the classic style of oil on canvas, it feels futuristic in its style and form. Is this an idea you are interested in exploring?

I care about the classical goals of painting, its direction towards realism, but at the same time I understand that repeating the past is neither possible nor needed.

I think more about the present and constantly ask myself what and how the present is. I respect and admire the history of art, and I try to avoid making amnesiac painting.

Your U.S. solo debut, *Sprites* was recently on view at Downs & Ross in New York. Can you tell us about this show?

Thrilling at the beginning, sold out at the end.

What does this moment in your career mean to you?

Assessment of a period, preparing for a new one.

What's next for you?

New continent, I hope.

At the end of every interview, we like to ask the artist to recommend a friend whose work you love for us to interview next. Who would you suggest?

VIKKY ALEXANDER.

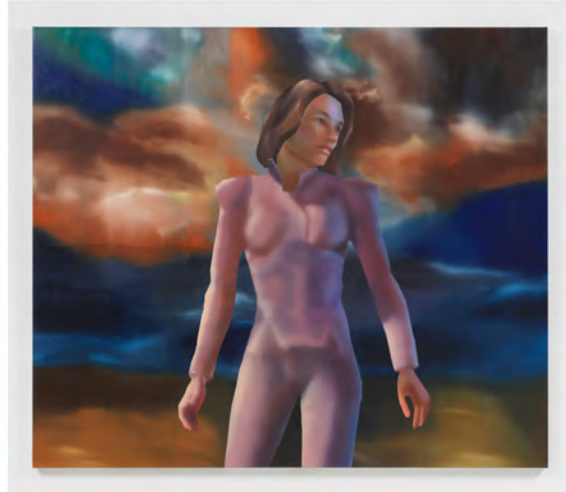
The New York Times

New York Art Galleries: What to See Right Now

May 23, 2019

Rutene Merk

Through June 9. Downs & Ross, 96 Bowery, Manhattan; 646-741-9138, downsross.com.



“Aki” (2019), oil on canvas, by Rutene Merk in her new show, “Sprites.”
Rutene Merk and The Downs & Ross, New York; Jeffrey Sturges

One key to the eerie, unpainterly appearance of Rutene Merk’s canvases can be found in the gallery release she wrote for her show “Sprites” at Downs & Ross, which lists definitions for the word “sprite.” These include “an elf or fairy,” as well as “a computer graphic which may be moved onscreen and otherwise manipulated as a single entity.”

Ms. Merk, a Vilnius-born, Munich-based painter, similarly manipulates the figures and backgrounds in her paintings, simulating techniques like masking and 3-D texturing mapping in computer graphics. Her paintings also look as if they might’ve been sprayed or digitally printed, but they were created the old-fashioned, analog way, by simply painting on canvas.

The results range from “Aki” (2019), a fuzzy portrait based on the main character in the video game “Final Fantasy” to “Cosmolite” (2019), a piece of molded plastic luggage treated here like sleek minimalist sculpture. Ms. Merk carries on the tradition of illusionism and expert trickery that modern artists sought to eradicate, but enlisting other forces. The digital references are obvious, but her third “sprite” definition feels relevant: a faint flash “emitted in the upper atmosphere over a thunderstorm owing to the collision of high-energy electrons with air molecules.” Ms. Merk harnesses a bit of that in her paintings.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

ARTFORUM



Rutene Merk, *Aki*, 2019, oil on canvas, 55 x 63".

NEW YORK

Rutene Merk

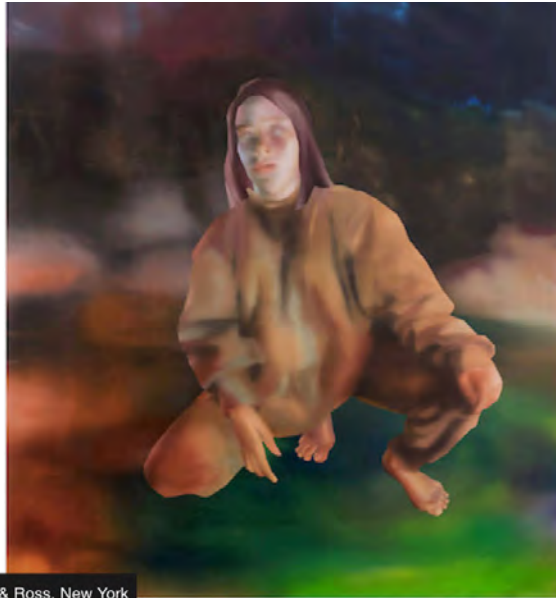
DOWNS & ROSS
96 Bowery 2nd floor
April 28–June 9

Choose your fighter: Verrocchio's bronze *David*, 1473–75, an epicene precursor to Michelangelo's opus, who stands winsomely over Goliath's head; or Aki Ross, the valiant protagonist of Hironobu Sakaguchi's CGI breakthrough *Final Fantasy: The Spirit Within* (2001). These two prove the most familiar muses

in Rutene Merk's "Sprites," the Lithuanian painter's first New York solo show. The parallels between Verrocchio and Sakaguchi eventually cohere: Both creators are revered for their fierce, lifelike rendering of the human figure. Yet in *Aki*, 2019, and *David at Night*, 2018, Merk coarsens this realism with a late '90s RPG aesthetic and flush, screenlike facture. Informed by video games, the internet, and various tropes from antiquity, her vaguely Impressionist, always phantasmal portraiture loops us into avatars' afterlives—take *Scribe*, 2019, a gauzy portrayal of the ancient Egyptian bust that went viral for sharing Michael Jackson's likeness. It makes one wonder: When is an image no longer an image?

Merk has spoken before of being inspired by *tronies*, a Dutch genre devoted to the exaggerated facial expressions of stock characters. Her own subjects' visages, though, remain impassive. Consider *Kamea*, 2019, a laminated-looking androgyne who genuflects amid beige and green . . . lily pads? Too bleary to tell. The press release features definitions of the word *sprite*, one of which tells us that it's a graphic-design term for background manipulation. In Merk's laggy simulacra, story lines become lives, agency is as real as fantasy, and fantasy's reality must not be trivialized. She gives her sprites souls only to maroon them in depthlessness. Just look at them: as detached as the simpering head at David's feet.

— Zack Hatfield



Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Downs & Ross, New York

Rutene Merk, “Sprites”

Art, Contemporary art **Downs & Ross**, Chinatown Until Sunday June 2 2019

Rutene Merk, a Lithuanian artist who lives and works in Munich, Germany, marks her U.S. solo debut with portrait paintings of subjects who looked like they stepped out of a video game circa 2000—which is to say weirdly uncanny and disarticulated at the same time. While the show title seems to allude to fairy tale characters, it's also a reference to a term used in computer graphics to describe the overlay of figure to background.

Art World

Editors' Picks: 19 Things Not to Miss in New York's Art World This Week

artnet News, April 22, 2019

Sunday, April 28–Sunday, June 2



Rutene Merk, *Kamea* (2019). Courtesy of Downs & Ross.

18. **"Rutene Merk: Sprites" at Downs & Ross**

What if your Sim had a soul? Rutene Merk's pixelated yet eerily lifelike portraits are sure to spark this question. The Lithuanian artist makes her US solo show debut at Downs & Ross this weekend.

Location: Downs & Ross, 96 Bowery, 2nd Floor

Price: Free

Time: Wednesday–Sunday, 12 p.m.–6 p.m.

—Cristina Cruz