

On cultural doubt - the paintings of Veronica Smirnoff

Veronica Smirnoff's paintings assume the form and means of religious icons. Discreet and portable in their dimensions, the use of egg tempera on plaster, on wood panel, lends the painted surface a bright luminescence, a sense of a reified depiction. Yet whilst this preciousness embraces the status of the painting as an auratic object, increasingly these works pointedly resist the 'horror vacui' of the icon, the resplendent density of imagery and pattern. Rather, bright viscous blobs and loose washes of paint sit on the surface of the plaster ground, maintaining a semi-transparent liquidity that seems volatile. Depictions of figures and structures appear to emerge from landscapes of dense white ground, threatening to recede again.

If the precision of process, and layering of surface within an icon can be seen as an act of containment, definitive in both its sacred imagery and a heightened sense of value and belief, then Smirnoff's paintings render a secular uncertainty. Distinct from its highly prepared objecthood, the applied, painted scene exists between a faded sketch and an accumulation of "painterly" events - drips, texture, pictorial omission and over-description". The milky opacity of the ground serves both to resist the paint and become part of its figuration, reading as dense banks of snow, or the looming blankness of a leaden sky. The mobilization of substance, in this limbo between depiction and actual material effect, achieves a hinterland that is both redolent in our experience of the object and in our sense of an actual or imagined cultural space.

These emergent scenes shift between the dreamy fantasy of Russian folklore (a popular subject for icon craftsmen forced to reassign their skills during the Soviet era) the liturgy of Russian Orthodoxy, and architectural symbols of modernity. Smirnoff locates rudimentary figures as observers of these scenes, economic daubs of paint in a distant landscape, or groups jauntily pushed to the edge of the composition so that their heads are cropped. The onlookers never quite seem wholly present within the occasion or tableau they are part of. Often their distant vigil seems to question their belief in what is before them, whether it be a golden, statuesque horse or a brutalist block of flats. This is perhaps a point of collapse, a collision between enigmatic myth, liturgical belief and caustic modernity that disables a cultural specificity and leaves that which is fluid, and impermanent. These works in their formal iconic heritage and in elements of imagery speak of the artist's Russian identity. Yet they equally locate a space that through conflict of belief is not centred, but instead - in parallel with the proprietary effects of painting itself - displays a desire for solidity and substance.

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