

Floating World

Ruby Swinney

26 November - 21 January, 2023

AKINCI presents *Floating World*, an exhibition of new paintings, by Ruby Swinney. As has become characteristic of the young South African artist, these works are painted in monochrome colours on white silk canvases. The paintings on display show idyllic landscapes, often contrasted with man-made structures. The inhabitants of this *Floating World* are an eerie, spiritualized people, their faces removed, erased, or replaced by light.

The name *Floating World*, comes from the Japanese term *ukiyo*, meaning floating, fleeting, or transient world. It's a term emphasising living in the moment, detached from the difficulties of life closely associated with *ukiyo-e*, the Japanese art movement, which depicted leisure scenes of the Edo bourgeoisie.

The title of Swinney's show uses the term *Floating World* for its poignant ambiguity, even absurdity. Like the printmaking of *ukiyo-e*, Swinney's paintings also depict a certain urban middle-class leisure: the figures

Swinney traffics with are often engaged in banal activities of 'tastefulness': visiting greenhouses, flower gardens, bathing in natural pools, hiking or foraging. But we also feel a keen sadness in these trivialities of the everyday; an attempt to reconnect with nature, to recreate it, conserve it, return to it.

There is also a word play involved in the word *ukiyo*, one which puns on a double meaning of 'sorrowful world', and this is inherent here too. These paintings are full of loss, confusion and alienation, but what event has caused these feelings is not shown, it is not certain, or cannot be remembered. It's uncertain where *Floating World* is situated, or indeed what it is, what we are shown and to what purpose. Much of what we are shown looks like our contemporary world, and yet it could as easily be the past as it could be the future, a dystopia or a utopia. Architecture of the past can be seen in nearly every painting, but the styles – Victorian, modernist, contemporary – give us no indication of the period of these scenes depicted.

Architecture becomes a signifier of history, the passing of styles, fashions, periods, eras, whole shifts in society and order are represented on the margins of the paintings. They are the signs of our faded, failed dreams, outmoded Utopias, past futures haunting the present. These paintings are figurative and representative in the direct sense of the word, and yet there is very little expression in the actual painterliness or technique. The portrayal of these intense environments, brimming with carefully rendered detail, are painted almost hyper realistically at times, with a detached exactness of a recording device. While the faces are often distorted, erased and turned into strange blazes of white spirit, these distortions are not fuelled by emotional or existential expression as is the case with Kirchner, or van Gogh; Swinney's painting prefers a detachment closer to the automatism of surrealism, of Dali or Magritte, something closer to the dry impersonality of Duchamp's Chocolate Grinder.

Swinney often uses a projector to project the image onto the canvas, this detachment from painting the subject, moves the painter into a mode of automatic rendering, with the preciseness of a machine or a computer, or a chocolate grinder, or a recording machine, the paintings construct a record of testimony to this internal world with complete objectivity. The artist-machine tries to expunge the expressed, lonely, mood-ridden self from this process.



At times the feeling is that these images are not paintings so much as they are, recordings, evaluations of light and shade. But the question then remains what are they recording, what are these paintings bearing witness to? In 'Observations' (2022) every leaf is so finely rendered, but why give witness to these leaves, but why does the painting feel that this is important? Is there not in this attention to detail, a similar paroxysm to Gerard Manly Hopkins: 'See; not a hair is, not an eyelash, not the least lash lost; every hair/Is, hair of the head, numbered.' And here is where all the emotionality of the work is embedded, not in gestural brushstrokes or thick application of paint, no drips or splatters, but its exercise of labour, the attention to detail – as attention is the natural prayer of the soul. It is in this strange labour where we find these works are indeed saturated with emotion. In contrast to colour field painting, wherein Rothko or Barnett Newman, for example, cast away detail for large planes of colour intensity; in Swinney's work the overabundance of detail is what accomplishes a similarity of expression, a kind of noise of living, an almost spiritual expression. In this way Swinney precludes the self from entering the painting only for it to be sublimated through its very declension.

*Details work: _Study in Pink I_, 2022, oil on silk, 90 x 90 x 4, 5 cm, photo by Peter Tijhuis
Text by Noah Swinney*