



ART PRACTICAL

Review - Monday's Dirty Light
By Jeanne Gerrity, October 7, 2013

The figure of a gangly bearded man holding a cigarette sits barefoot, his somberly clad body bending to fit within the contours of a white rectangle punctuated by thick blotches of pale grayish paint. This neatly contained image is surrounded by an industrial scene of geometric buildings and factory smokestacks. Another painting, hung on an adjoining wall to this one, reflects its composition: the same slightly forlorn figure—this time in shoes—sits on the edge of the white frame, but this background depicts an idyll from nature with lush hills, a placid river, and bright blue birds perched in trees. With these two complementary works presented like an open book, Sanya Kantarovsky introduces us to the melancholic character who inhabits the paintings (and a porcelain bust) in *Monday's Dirty Light* at Altman Siegel Gallery.

The exhibition borrows its title from Wallace Stevens's poem *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1936), itself a meditation on Picasso's *The Old Guitarist* (1903/04). From these dual references, Kantarovsky weaves a loose narrative that draws upon multiple forms of creative expression and ultimately depicts the daily struggles of the artistic process as represented by an anonymous man. The titles of the previously discussed paintings—*Homo Duplex I* and *Homo Duplex II* (all pieces are from 2013)—reference French sociologist Émile Durkheim's theory that humans are divided between their instinctual desires and their socialized personalities, and Kantarovsky's protagonist seems to embody this dichotomy.



Sanya Kantarovsky, Homo Duplex I, 2013; watercolor, gesso, bleach, ink on linen; 47.25 x 35.5 in. Courtesy of Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

Four paintings hang close to each other on the far side of the main gallery, encouraging the viewer to read them from left to right. In the first, *Demands of Time*, the overwhelmed man lies in the fetal position pressed against a beanbag with a hand-sewn patch, looking upward at a swarm of papers flying above his head. As in Kantarovsky's earlier work, the blank page is a recurring motif, its emptiness imbued with potential but also a certain dread. Is the white paper waiting for marks, or has it been erased? Kantarovsky spent his early years in 1980s Moscow, where artwork with a political message was subversive by necessity, hidden beneath an outwardly conformist veneer, and this strategy may have influenced his own ambiguous paintings.

In the back room, *Impression I (blue)* recalls in hue—and more obliquely, in its title—the color saturation of Picasso's iconic Blue Period painting, the aforementioned *The Old Guitarist*. Picasso's blind guitarist suggests the loneliness of the world, while the instrument itself signifies a glimmer of hope. Similarly, in Kantarovsky's watercolor, the blue tone sets a melancholic mood, as a thin, clothed man looks down at the naked backside of a woman lounging on a single bed, her laptop open in front of her. The computer may have replaced the musical instrument or the book as a symbol of creativity, but the lack of acknowledgement between the

two figures also points to the danger of isolation inherent in this familiar contemporary scenario. With *Monday's Dirty Light*, Kantarovsky retains the influence of books—both physically and intellectually—on his art but ventures out past the safe territory of the whimsical and witty.¹ The discernible character at the heart of these paintings is hapless in the modern world. Like Jacques Tati's *Monsieur Hulot*, who Kantarovsky cites as an influence, he stumbles through life bewildered and alone.

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