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Hope Gangloff

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | MARCH 10, 2011



Hope Gangloff's subjects are not pictures of health. Their skin has a gray-blue pallor, the tone a bit vampiric. It could be the cigarettes they're constantly smoking or the river of booze that runs through the work; it could be simple, romantic New York ennui. Regardless, with her most recent solo show, at Susan Inglett, the artist has come fully into her own as a refined, impeccable portraitist of a certain slice of 21st-century youth ("youth" being a relative life stage in large cities, of course, where it continues until roughly the age of 38). Five large canvases from 2011 — depicting three guys and two girls in various poses, occasionally bathing or painting — form a connected suite in the main gallery, each subject seeming to stare off in the direction of the next one. Two smaller pieces, of Polish magazines, foodstuffs, and book covers, supplement the portraits.

At the risk of sounding totally weird, I have to say that Gangloff has a knack for hands and lips. Her subjects are never really doing anything monumental, but the paintings are undeniably dramatic because of the way she depicts digits: fingers splayed on a stockinginged knee or resting on a denim-covered hip, curled around a cigarette that we know, without being told, must be an American Spirit. The spotlight is on the small detail, whether it's the pattern of black tights or the lettering on a beer bottle.

"Freelancer (Mikey Hernandez)" shows a man (presumably the work-from-home Mikey of the title) sprawled in a claw-foot tub, scanning the newspaper. The minutiae are key: the legible text on papers strewn across the bathroom floor; the whiskered texture of wool socks, leg hair, beard bristle. It's a stunning portrait, and it gives Mikey a sort of scruffy elegance — at least more than a 30-something lounger in the tub typically possesses. (Not to say that it's "Death of Marat" redux, but the composition has an unexpected power.) In "Vio et Livres" and "Warming Ms. Adams," Gangloff's red-lipped women are paired with bookshelves, uncorked wine bottles, and space heaters. Everyone seems to be waiting, but patiently. Oddly enough, the living subjects at the center of these portraits are almost pulseless. Gangloff derives dynamic energy instead from the bursts of color animating the inanimate objects: blankets, the spines of books, geometric jags of wallpaper.

The works at Susan Inglett represent a continuation of Gangloff's visual taxonomy of a very narrowly defined circle of well-educated, culturally astute white people. They are clearly friends; they may well be recovering hipsters, despite n+1's recent eulogies for the genus. But the paintings are intriguing whether or not you are one of these people, or know people like this — hell, even if you claim to hate people like these, the hirsute Saranac sippers, the pale and overread. Is Gangloff guilty of romanticizing her subjects? Of course, and that's a beautiful thing. It makes you wish that each of life's unremarkable moments might be suffused with the same vibrant grace that she has bestowed on the ones she has captured here.