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LISA RUYTER IN CONVERSATION WITH ANA FINEL HONIGMAN

Standing Room Only, 2006
Acrylic on Canvas, 180 x 150 cm
Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg/Paris
Image Credit: Regina Hügli, Vienna



Lisa Ruyter's paintings may appear to have a distinctive paint-by-number quality. But they are very specific to Ruyter's experiences and offer unique personal observations. Ruyter takes her own snapshots and transcribes them onto canvases, outlining the forms with a bold border and then filling in the shapes with her signature palette of mint green, tangerine, dusty lavender and teal. The idiosyncratic color selection and the succinctness of her imagery create a spell that elf-eared downtown New York critic and character Reverend Jen summed up as, "looking at Lisa's paintings is like being drunk."

Like the rush that her images evoke, Ruyter's successes have come quickly. Born in Washington, DC in 1968, she studied at New York's School of Visual Arts and then Hunter College, and gave her first solo show at the Wooster Gardens gallery in New York in 1993. She was a partner at TEAM gallery in the nineties and was the jewel in Leo Koenig's well-regarded roster there. Since then, she has exhibited throughout Europe, America and Japan. Her streamlined, acid-hued large-scale paintings of socializing hipsters, unconventional holiday locales, and slinky models sashaying down catwalks made her Gen X's answer to Alex Katz. In Katz's tradition, Ruyter's paintings illustrate her era's image of an ideal urbane lifestyle. And like Katz in the eighties, by the late-nineties Ruyter's paintings hung like talismans of cool in many of the most glamorous New York apartments.

"The Comfort of Strangers," Ruyter's third solo show at her Paris gallery, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, ran from January 12 - February 17, and a show of new work opened on February 23 at the Taka Ishii Gallery in Tokyo (until 22 March). In May, she will show work in Korea, followed by a Fall exhibition in Vienna, where she now lives and works.

Somewhere In The Middle, 2007
Acrylic on Canvas, 180 x 180 cm
Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg/Paris. Image Credit: Tania Marcadella, Vienna



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LISA RUYTER: This exhibition consists of paintings of crowds, which is a series that I have been working on for quite a while now. All of the source photos for the work in this show were taken in crowds in many different situations, street fairs, the Venice Biennale, and a number of different concert situations.

ANA FINEL HONIGMAN: Generally, are you observing that people comport themselves similarly in these settings? Or are these entirely different crowds?

LR: They are entirely different crowds, really just connected by the fact of my having been there with my camera. There is occasionally a little crossover.

AFH: Are you interested in the sociological aspects of crowds or are you drawn more to the aesthetics of people bundled together?

LR: I am interested in both. I think there is more overlap in these things than people realize, as the way we live and move around and circulate can influence a specific mindset.

AFH: How did you select crowd gatherings that represented what you wanted to express?

LR: The work that I have made previously consisted of mostly landscapes, and I really wanted to return to figuration, but with something very different from the fashion series. Actually when I started the fashion series, I had originally thought that it was going to be about the crowds, specifically about the audience, but then it ended up being about female figures.

AFH: The models are paid to stand out in a crowd. That's their job. What about the images of people who are more or less equally remarkable physically, or are overlookable as the centers of attention?

LR: One thing that I wanted to do was to make a painting that really conveyed that feeling of being alone in a crowd, the kind of energy that surrounds you, which can be at one minute exciting and the next claustrophobic. This situation for me is a really good metaphor for that thing I often try to get out of a painting, that tension between understanding and confusion, representational and abstract. It is also emotionally similar to the set of feelings that I get when I go to see art in a crowded situation like Chelsea or many of the art fairs.

Screen Test, 2007
Acrylic on Canvas, 180 x 150 cm
Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg/Paris; Image Credit: Regina Hügli, Vienna



AFH: What observations have you made about crowds and class or crowds and race or crowds and any other

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AFH: What observations have you made about crowds and class, or crowds and race, or crowds and any other sociological interest, from painting a Rush concert and an art fair?

LR: People with common interests gather together. I think an artist would have to really make some serious transgressions to get to a place where an intelligent comment about class can be made. Although I am often drawn to the idea of transgression, of going into situation where no one would expect me to go, ultimately my own curiosity wins over the idea of transgression. Real transgression can take a lot of energy to sustain, and I don't think it is so interesting for my own practice.

AFH: But you are interested in identifying particular groupings or types within gatherings?

LR: Any kind of crowd defies classification. I find that the people who go to art fairs are generally a very different crowd than what you would see at a museum opening in Vienna. I don't think that I was really in any kind of situation to make any kind of smart observation about class. In the show in Paris are paintings made from four different concerts; Rush, Peaches (on the beach during Art Basel Miami), a summer three-day festival sponsored by an Austrian radio station, and the Melvins when they played at Blum and Poe. All concerts that I would have gone to anyway regardless of this series, and two of them specifically in art crowd situations.

AFH: Have you ever had serious claustrophobia?

LR: No, my fears tend to be more apocalyptic, and yet also more nebulous in nature! I am very much at home in a crowd, unless there is something making it particularly uncomfortable in a way that I can't enjoy, like pouring rain and mud at an outdoor concert, or a big cloud of cigarette smoke in any environment. But that has nothing to do with the crowd. I've never had the feeling that I could not get out of a crowd, even when it is a crazy situation like getting squashed right in front of the stage at a sold out concert with a crazy crowd. I love walking into that situation. It is such a visceral way to experience music. A crowd is like a safe context for me somehow personally.

AFH: Do you think that these gatherings are about finding a "comfort" or unity by being with like-minded strangers, or are we really looking at an assortment of random, and essentially isolated, individuals?

LR: I would say both. I think that both of these concepts are rather meaningless without the other. You can get just as lost at either end. My favorite thing about a crowd is that emotional roller coaster ride, which takes a certain amount of letting go to enjoy. A crowd is a nice container for that, because after you can go home and reinforce the things that make you feel comfortable and at home. I know that not everybody sees things that way.

The Tokyo show for example, is more about an audience situation, and could be seen as a little more didactic. There are more concert pictures, and paintings of people taking photographs, and some kind of meaning arc that happens when they are in the same room together. I plan to make a wall painting of a crowd from photos that I took at a Rush concert, because I think it will be a curious feeling to stand in front of a giant painting of a cheering crowd, surrounded by paintings of people taking photographs.

The Circular Room, 2007
Acrylic on Canvas, 180 x 150 cm
Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg/Paris. Image Credit: Regina Hügli, Vienna



AFH: How did you decide to show these in Tokyo and show the art fair ones in Paris?

LR: The ones in Paris are mixed - actually there are more from photos that I took in two different years at this holiday in Zurich called Sechseleuten, which involves a parade and street festival situation (and the explosion and ritual burning of a snowman in Bellevueplatz) I guess I did think that this mix of various crowd situations would be more appropriate to the audience in Paris, where I have already done two shows, both of landscape series. I thought that it was important to show a series where the concept was less pointed and the emphasis was more on the functioning of the individual

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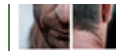
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works. It is really great to show with a gallery in Paris that has such an amazing roster of artists who are long established museum regulars like Thaddaeus Ropac. It makes such a necessary and important context for my work, but it is also important for me to be able to present it in a context where I can see that my ideas remain in the moment and specific to the location.



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A Face In The Crowd, 2007
Acrylic on Canvas, 122 x 91 cm
Courtesy Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo. Image Credit: Regina Hügli, Vienna



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AFH: What is specific to Tokyo in the selection you chose to show at the Taka Ishii gallery?

LR: The ones that were more specific to this audience situation seemed like better paintings for Tokyo. That show has a few paintings from the concerts that are focused on people taking snapshots with digital cameras and cameraphones. I just think that people in Japan are closer to the potential meaning of such a painting of mine, and the arc of meaning that might come from a room with 4 such works, mixed with other audience pieces. That technology is so much further along there, though I think anyone in Paris would get it as well. But there are another things about Tokyo for me. Contemporary art is just seen differently. It is more of an isolated event, nobody is trying to make an argument that it is some natural growth from a long tradition of patrons and galleries and so on. I feel like I can make a show that has pictures of a lot of people at concerts, and if I want, the work can get close to cartoony, and I will not run the risk of it being misunderstood as some kind of statement about youth culture.

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AFH: How do these concerns play out differently for the Paris show?

LR: This is more relevant to Paris: What I have discovered in this series is that there is a certain scale where it does not matter if any single person is recognizable, and then when the figures get larger in relation to the frame, it becomes essential that there is at least one figure that you could call a 'character,' a figure that carries some kind of unique identifier, the eyes especially well rendered or an interesting shirt, haircut or glasses, in order to make it work as a painting. Usually in one of my paintings, this point of attention can be more abstract, such as an especially weirdly placed and dissonant color, or a beer label or some small incident of specificity. And the coolest thing about these pictures is that many of them look very collaged from different images, when in fact they are directly derived from a single photograph. When they are really successful, the pictures seem to consist of a multiplicity of 'characters' each doing their own thing, related only by the chance instance of this particular painting.

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AFH: Are you concerned that these signifiers will make your work appear dated, or are you specifically interested in depicting this current era, in all its particulars?

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LR: I am more concerned with me getting old!

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Somewhere In Between, 2007
Acrylic on Canvas, 150 x 150 cm
Courtesy Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo
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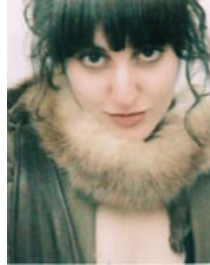
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ANA FINEL HONIGMAN is a critic, PhD candidate in art history at Oxford University and Senior London Correspondent for the Saatchi Gallery's online magazine. She is Art Editor of Alef (alefmag.com/) and contributes regularly to such publications as Style.com, Grazia, Tank, Sleek and Harper's Bazaar.



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