

And they lived sadly ever after

curated by Marta Orsola Sironi

\* Please read the following text in a Carrie Bradshaw mood

"Once upon a time an English journalist came to New York ...." No. Stop it: if you start something with 'Once upon a time', people expect the story to have a perfect happy ending.

I have been wondering: in 2023, are we still able to believe in fairy tales? What happened to our perfect happy ending? In a city that never sleeps but daydreams, what is the 'happily ever after' we expect?

Expectation: that's the word. We are fed by expectations all our lives: the expectation for the perfect school, then job, then marriage then... well, you know how this continues. Unfortunately, as we grow up, we discover that in the real world, the expectations to which we have been living up to often turn out to be unrealisable paper-mache dreams that shatter as soon as we try to grasp them. The acknowledgement of the failure of high expectations generates in us a sense of inadequacy and frustration, often condemning us to the abyss of despair. And even if hope is the last to die, my question is: if we can't trust happy endings anymore, how can we survive in this messy world?

The answer proposed by this exhibition is humour. Taking life more lightly and sideways, looking at things from their comic side can free us from the boulder of unfulfilled expectations. Humour and irony are also powerful communicative tools, allowing us to accept and assimilate reality. Maybe it's true that a laugh will save the world? My advice? Stop watching romantic movies and turn on *The Simpsons*. In 2023, we can still believe in fairy tales but do not have to take them seriously. Someone said that life has a funny way of sneaking up on you and some time is better to be ironic.

Irony underlies the works of Holly Halkes, a London-based British artist who paints life-inspired tragi-comedies. Chaotic and brilliant food fights, where time and space are suspended, almost crystallised in the gesture of a hand trying to grasp something out of reach. What is it like to live in the 21st century, in the century of abundance and cold intimacies, where everything seems available but is ultimately vain? Holly Halkes's paintings engage with the values of the carnivalesque and create an alternate social space characterised by freedom and abundance to explore human behaviours and social interactions that border

between real life and fantasy. Semi-melted ice creams, cakes, masks, heart-shaped sunglasses, margaritas and delicacies of all kinds rise into the sky, as if after an explosion, close to an inescapable fall. Grotesque hands with red nails twisted like claws and bloodshot-eyed seagulls try to grab as much as they can, but in vain. Holly Halkes' work is a fairy tale that just isn't working. Everything remains crystallised and unactual, one can look but not touch, desire but not obtain. Beneath the glossy surface, reminiscent of the sterile sheen of digital images, hovers a sense of loneliness and grotesqueness, which speaks of our conflicts and our search for identity beyond vulnerabilities and anxieties. Nevertheless, at midnight, in Halkes' cartoonish story, even the most beautiful of princesses turns back into the ugly stepsister.

Cartoons and humour are also the stylistic features of New York-based artist Ray Hwang's practice. Born in 1992 in Los Angeles from a family immigrated from Asia, he taught himself to draw from cartoons as it had to figure a new culture out for himself and his family. The motifs in his paintings are the result of childhood memories and this continuous shifting between two backgrounds. They are found images, brought to light by the artist whose desire is not to add a subject to the paintings, but to pull something out of them. He digs into layers of colours and techniques to find the image under them, like an archaeologist or a kid in the sandbox. "The magic" that the discovery generates in him is the most powerful urge to paint, which the artist pursues in every work.

At the forefront of Ray Hwang's research is humour. This series has been started during the difficult time of lockdown when he found himself separated from his family and deals with emotional and dramatic topical issues, such as racism, childhood memory, the relationship with family and with living suspended between two cultures. The stylistic signature for the artist is to talk about such themes but without ever taking himself too seriously. He learned this lightness from cartoons, which through humour and irony are able to communicate direct emotions without being heavy-handed.

Tiange Yu, born in China in 1998 and based in London, defines himself as a rehearser of space, a composer of colours and lines, and a director of fantasy. Influenced by past study experience of Theatrical Scenery, he often draws inspiration from specific spaces such as dramas, ballets, runaways, and botanical garden shows. His canvases portray virtual landscapes of an imagined and

invented reality where pleasure, ambiguity, dreams and the escapism are never really reachable, but remain elusive phantoms.

With an opposite approach to Holly Halkes, who paints backgrounds as flat as the digital image is smooth, Tiange Yu seeks to contrast it with the materiality of pigment sticks, which allow his hand to wander free on the canvas a creator-god or conductor. In this way, the artist embarks on his own inner journey, wandering through a natural and witty theatre. He brings to life a realm that is different from the real world, conveying an uncanny impression somewhere between unreality and concreteness, instability and stability, abandoning all pretense of gravity in order to fly free of all constraints. There is no hierarchy between animals, plants and humans. Tiange Yu seems to explore his own inner universe by continuously breaking the conventional space of things and rearranging the fragments of the narrative in his own way.

Speaking of space, we finally come to Hamish Chapman, an artist born\* in a village in the English countryside in 1993 and based between Glasgow and London. The painting for Chapman is a playground, where opposing tensions collide and meet, as in a tennis match. The artist explores concepts such as queer identity, gender, relationships and transition. Tennis, a highly psychological relationship game, becomes for them a metaphor for a psychological journey through the very idea of transition, to break out of the narrow boundaries of our small, restricted world. To do so, Chapman dances in their paintings on the thread of duality, bringing ambivalent elements into the work. Barriers, such as fences and gates, in their practice, are always crossable, both metaphorically and visually, as at the same time playground and body merge into a single territory of exploration.

Looking and being looked at, perceiving oneself and being perceived, one's own gaze and the gaze of others, are the themes of this duality analysed by the artist. The eyes, recurring in their practice, reflect how the decision to step outside the boundaries of our conventions makes us highly visible to the gaze and judgement of people. Those painted are on the one hand precisely these judging eyes and at the same time reflect on the value of the eye as a symbol of beauty and the first vehicle of our relationship with the world. Similarly, the accessories depicted by Chapman are always ambivalent: while they change the way we perceive ourselves, they also change the way we are perceived. The hair clip, for example, becomes in the artist's transition an element of aesthetic transformation, but at

the same time, it is a source of aggression, the aggression of those who would like to enclose them in an established form.

And just like that, this text comes to an end. Dear readers, I hope you were not expecting a fairy tale moral, or even worse, a happy ending.