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A GAME OF FAITH

by Kara L. Rooney

"Beauty will be convulsive, or it will not be," proclaimed Andre Breton. He called this aesthetic "surrealist," but in a culture radically revamped by the ascendancy of mercantile values, to ask that images be jarring, clamorous, eye-opening, seems like elementary realism as well as good business sense...How else to make a dent when there is incessant exposure to images, and overexposure to a handful of images seen again and again? The image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence." – Susan Sontag

Susan Sontag wrote the above in her canonical treatise, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, in response to documentary photography's role in the registration of social consciousness. Here, she argues for the functional aspect of the grotesque—specifically the visual representations of horror, as located in images of war-ravaged cities, human atrocities, and natural and civic disasters—and its subsequent implications for inciting a reading of the image that, in its pornographic tendencies (achieved via its sense of voyeuristic distance), is simultaneously fantastical, fetishized and reality-based. The French-born artist, Truc-Anh, employs similar methodologies for approaching the medium of paint, as is witnessed in his most recent suite of work, collectively titled, *CROIRE/DOUTER*. As the title itself suggests, the duality of the image—figure vs. ground; black vs. white; presence vs. absence; fetishistic commodification vs. spiritual transcendence—localized within the intermediary spaces of belief and doubt and read through a lens of art historical and contemporary references, constitutes Truc-Anh's pictorial sensibility, one that consistently challenges the viewer to situate him/herself within the articulated frame.

But, as Sontag notes, there is a catch. Grounding is illusory. Reality is subjective. Amidst our culture's tremendous proliferation of visual sensations, logged and repeated ad infinitum, collective cognizance cannot be quantifiably known. Such is the trap Truc-Anh sets for the viewer, for as one attempts to ground

themselves in the presented imagery—in the articulation of a brushstroke, the artist’s monochromatic palette, or the familiarity of the tradition of painting, portraiture, et al.—their foothold on the work’s reading slips further and further from view. Rather than a way out (transcendence), we are offered a way in—a fittingly fractured glimpse into the void—for in Truc-Anh’s world, there is no paradise, only paradise lost. That slippage, induced by the act of pairing a tangible medium (paint) with an attempted visualization of the unknown (ghost, spirit, energy) casts the bait, and signifier and signified become irrevocably intertwined.

“It’s a relation of possession between the viewer and the work,” Truc-Anh states. “Our eyes will ALWAYS try to find stability.” Yet, it is in the act of destabilizing the image that the artist’s polymorphous iconography is transmitted. Flatly rendered oval disks and gestural swirls fracture the figure/ground relationship in paintings like *14 ans* and *Le 8 ne désigne pas l’infini, il est juste un 8*, while in others—*L’Adolescent* specifically—a hyperrealist sensibility dominates. Likewise, vertical striations such as those employed in *Agony* (ironically based on Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’s masterpiece, *Napoléon Ier sur son trône impérial*, from 1806) act to transpose the traditional heroicism of portraiture, turning the subject, as Truc-Anh remarks, “back from god to human.” These formal shifts, in addition to the conflation of narrative threads that fluctuate from image to image (a suitable allegory for our media-derived, cyber-saturated ADD), and the one-to-one scale of the works to human height, all aid in the enumeration of our contemporary emotional and visual dyslexia.

Punctuated by the white cube gallery space, Truc-Anh’s emphasis on the instability of the medium and its impotence as a communicative transmitter is further magnified by the violence of such optical disruptions. Here, arrestingly crisp white walls counter the melancholic gravitas of the artist’s black and white palette, lending the compositions an air of aggression otherwise latent in the imagery. Disruption and disorder become the only tangible knowns. What we as viewers are left with is the recognition of the instability of existence, of our sense of balance being thrown.

On the subject of painting as a medium, Truc-Anh notes, “Painting is an absolute medium to think about the world and also to read and compare human history through [various] ages, styles, and convictions...I try to begin a painting as if it was the first one. I want to free my mind of known techniques, methods and habits. Ignorance is the best way to watch things as they are, to override our mental conventions.” This quote recalls similar process-oriented beliefs put forth

by the abstract expressionists nearly 60 years ago, particularly Willem de Kooning, who famously stated, in an excerpt from *A Desperate View*, that:

Art should not have to be a certain way. Style is a fraud. To desire to make a style is an apology for one's anxiety...Order, to me, is to be ordered about and that is a limitation. Besides, in art, one idea is as good as another. The only certainty today is that one must be self-conscious.

Truc-Anh taps into such anti-stylistic sentiments in his refusal to be pinned down, either by formal and/or material concerns or, similarly, by conceptual dogma. In the gallery's center room, for example, one final work departs from the rest. With *A Game of Faith*, the artist shifts gears from painting to sculpture, presenting a work that physically espouses, in its very structural nature, the trembling quick of instability. Premised upon the childhood game, Jenga, the words *croire* and *douter* are stacked in an impossible configuration, and the wooden blocks, allegorical stand-ins for the notions of belief and doubt, teeter on the edge of collapse.

"It's not that I want to create a specific code linked with specific meaning, however," says Truc-Anh, "it is quite the opposite." "I try to find myself in what is lost...Intuition is essential." Again, one can trace such statements back to the words of De Kooning:

In Genesis it is said that in the beginning was the void and God acted upon it. For an artist that is clear enough. It is so mysterious that it takes away all doubt. One is utterly lost in space forever. You can float in it, fly in it, suspend in it...

Abstraction as a formal concept registers here as a truer way of engaging with and articulating creative output, a conviction that Truc-Anh instinctively shares. After all, it is in the fragment that we experience life, only attaining a sense of wholeness through the recognition of indeterminate pieces. In the abstracted spaces of Truc-Anh's portraits and sculptural forms, we know his subjects more intimately than if they were realistically portrayed. There is an explosion of the self recognizable in the absence of information presented—a combustion of sensibility and identity, which, in its raw and emotive staging, affords us access to our own inner visions of chaos and destruction, belief and doubt. The dichotomies present in the work, compounded by the artist's ambiguity of subject matter and material application, enable such readings; they are our point of entry. The poet John Keats referred to this ambiguous resistance as "negative capability." In the work of Truc-Anh, "negative capability" is registered on a

monumental scale, tethering us to our fleeting, fragile, and very human condition.



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