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HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Literary Paintings Inspired by a Fictional Poet

by **Danny Olda** on June 15, 2016



Rubens Ghenov, "Absanalecta, fig. 31" (2016), acrylic and ink transfer on linen, 20 x 16 inches (all images courtesy Morgan Lehman Gallery and the artist)

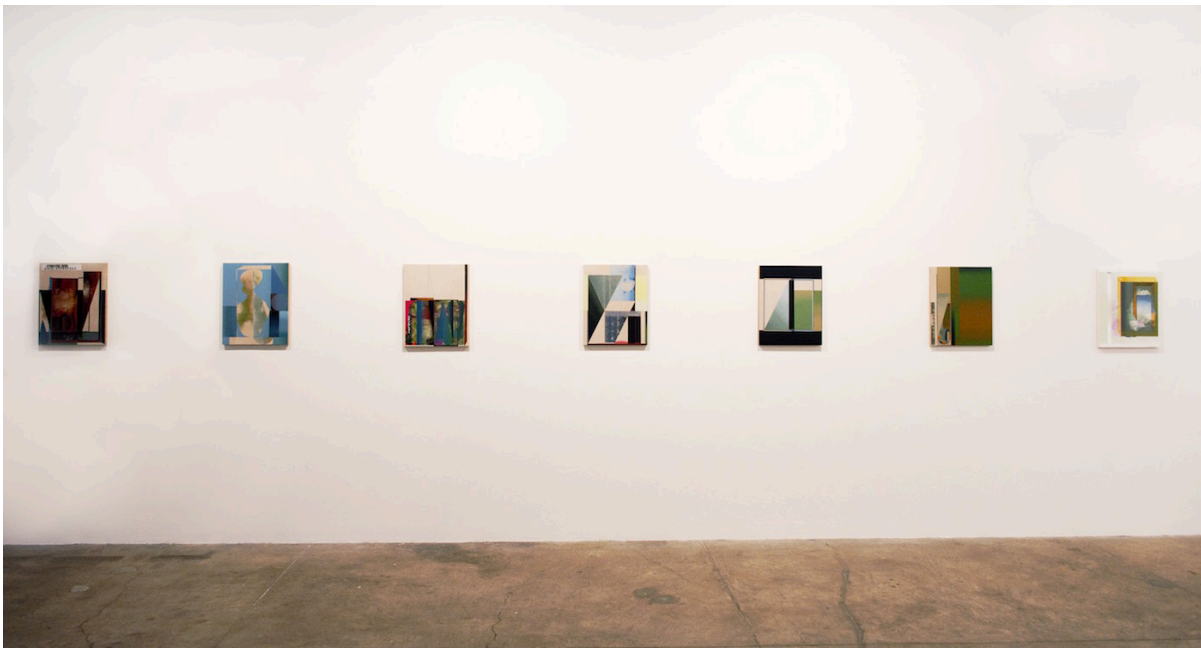
A freshman psych professor once described an experiment to my class wherein male turkeys were presented with realistic models of female turkeys, which the male turkeys promptly attempted to mate with. Progressively, parts — wings, feet, feathers — were

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removed from the model in an attempt to find the minimum visual stimulation needed to sexually arouse the male turkeys. The experiment ended with a model turkey's head atop a short wooden pole. As the class laughed at the turkeys' apparent stupidity, the professor reminded us that at least the turkeys needed a three dimensional model — humans can make do with a two dimensional representation. Though it likely wasn't the professor's point, this has always seemed like an amazing skill to me. Humans are easily able to traverse and create narratives for wide abstract spaces, affecting us in real (and in this case, biological) ways.

In Rubens Ghenov's current solo exhibition at Morgan Lehman Gallery, *Accoutrements in Marwa, an Interlude in Sliver*, the artist presents work in manifold manner of abstraction, inviting viewers to find their way across or freely lose themselves in the span. In many of the pieces, stout blocks of solid and gradating color are foregrounded by delicate plumes of acrylic paint that wick through raw linen. These colors, some vibrant but mostly subdued, feel as if they've had years to settle into the paintings, especially when they are at interplay with unprimed canvas. However, it may be Ghenov's knack for composition that is most distinct. Circles, teardrops, and rectangles are arranged with what would seem to be intense consideration. So much so that perhaps composition isn't the best word, but rather design.



Installation view of Rubens Ghenov's 'Accoutrements in Marwa, an Interlude in Sliver' at Morgan Lehman Gallery

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Emphasizing this sense of design, the paintings' resemblance to mid-20th century book cover illustration has been mentioned before and is difficult to miss. Of course, this is made plainer by the artist's frequent use of serif text, which he slices and splices, printing it upside down or backwards or all of the above. Significantly, in so doing he places the words just out of reach. Accordingly, the influence behind the paintings is literary and inaccessible.



Rubens Ghenov, "U Shape Sung" (2016), acrylic on linen, 20 x 16 inches (click to enlarge)

For the past four years, Ghenov's paintings have been inspired by the unpublished philosophical texts and verse of the late Spanish poet Angelico Morandá. Said to be born in Spain in 1940, the poet's work presumably remains unpublished because it is yet unwritten: Morandá is fictional, an invention of Rubens Ghenov.

Honestly, it was initially difficult to think of Morandá's relationship to the paintings as anything much more than a fictional origin story Ghenov constructed for his own work. I'm inclined to think the paintings are very good with or without their willfully spurious inspirational provenance.

Still, there's some pleasure in earnestly buying into the narrative behind Ghenov's work rather than dismissing it as a conceptual gimmick. The verity of his subject matter, which shares times with fanfiction

and online avatars, is not as relevant as I suspect it would have been past decades. That the story of Morandá is entertaining actually begins to countervail the fact that it isn't true. Further, the inspiration, intent, and influences of artists have never been entirely straightforward anyway.

Narratives have long served viewers to link abstract ideas to the artists and artwork that convey them. If figuration in art served as a guide to forming that narrative, abstract art made the work of divining the intent and ideas behind the work even murkier. That murk is where Ghenov situates himself and his work — the "sliver" in the exhibition title. The

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phrase “an interlude in silver” appears in *The Book of Disquiet* by (real-life) poet Fernando Pessoa. It is, of course, hardly a coincidence that *The Book of Disquiet* is also attributed to a fictional poet, in this case, Bernardo Soares, one of Pessoa’s several artistic alter egos or heteronyms.

With all these fictional poets, like other relatively heteronymous art projects, it’d be reasonable to expect the artist and the exhibition to lose themselves in heady semantics of authenticity, originality, and identity. However, they mostly don’t. Ghenov’s paintings and his use of a semi-heteronym somehow feel playful without sacrificing seriousness.

I’ve spent an inordinate but not unpleasant amount of time aiming to literally piece together Morandá’s/Ghenov’s words, reading past press releases and artist statements for anecdotes on the fictional poet, and fishing for the visual form it all assumes in the exhibition. Though admittedly not getting very far, it’s allowed me to read Ghenov’s work as lyrical pieces as much as contemporary paintings. The painting “U Shape Sung” (2016), for example, features the top half of the word “ANGELS” sunk into its lopsided composition. Another painting titled “U Shape Choir, Blues for Radigue” (2016), as well as several other pieces with terms referencing Hindustani classical music, expresses themes of a metaphysical poet. In past artist statements, Ghenov describes his character kneeling in the woods under a shroud that covers everything but his ears. I can almost faintly see a poet behind the paintings sensing music in the trees.

For artists and audiences alike, making some sense of visually and conceptually abstract work is a personal process of reification that often leans heavily on narrative, a story mortaring together the work and our thoughts on it. What is notable about this exhibition is that perhaps to help all of us along, himself included, Ghenov provides that narrative with an actual character.

Rubens Ghenov’s “Accoutrements in Marwa, an Interlude in Sliver” continues at Morgan Lehman Gallery (535 W 22nd St, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 18.



Rubens Ghenov, “L'altra Thaat, Lü” (2016), acrylic and graphite on linen, 20 x 16 inches