

PAINTERS ON PAINTINGS

Julian Kreimer on Andrea Belag's *Sunday Painter*

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Andrea Belag, *Sunday Painter*, 2018, Oil on linen, 66 x 72 inches

I've known Andrea Belag for 25 years, since she taught my second-year painting class in college. We found out then that we both like talking on the phone and painting in daylight. I had forgotten I'd inherited that habit from her.

So, when I ask Belag if *Sunday Painter* was made before or after her mother's death, it's not too intimate a question. Her mother, in her telling, was a Sunday painter. We're in Andrea's studio on a late Thursday morning in March, the great big old windows face west so the light coming in is diffuse but bright. The painting is also big, 66 x 72 inches. She has a show in Chelsea [*Inheritance* at Morgan Lehman through May 4] so most of the other paintings from the series are wrapped up, but this one is still out; it will stay behind in case anyone visits the studio during the show.

Her mom worked as a designer for her husband, Andrea's father, who had a children's garment factory in the city. In 1970, at fortyish, she decided to become a sculptor. While Andrea was growing up in the Jewish Bronx that I know only from Malamud and Ozick stories, her mom wasn't too happy with her working life. She had a tiny studio in their apartment into which she'd burrow herself on Sundays while Andrea would go to her grandparents' apartment upstairs, or to the planetarium with her father. She was banned from her mother's studio, which would sound harsh if I myself didn't have a nine-year-old daughter, whom I sometimes bring to my studio. I pretend I'll get something done, but what gets done, on my end, is usually minimal and involves hot glue. If one has only Sunday to paint, banning the kids makes a lot of sense.

Sunday Painter is big, and the shapes are loose. The movement of Belag's hand is always evident: in the loops that track an arm's swoop and return, in the two kinds of wipes that come back over the shapes—wipes with a rag, leaving hazy inflections of the shapes and colors that have been swept, and wipes with a broad knife that leave much less paint in their wake but spread the paint out to the edge of the flat blade in roughly parallel spaghetti-lines that change color based on what they picked up last.

It's not hard to metaphorize those traces, lines left behind by larger swaths of paint that were wiped away, lines whose own shifting colors reveal how they are made by what they've touched and changed. But as with so many of Belag's paintings, the point isn't to nail down the metaphors. It does affect my reading of the painting to know that it was painted on...she pulls out her phone and scrolls through the calendar... December 17, 2018. Her mother died...Andrea corrects herself, "completed dying" on December 8. Andrea tells me, teaches me, as we're talking, that death is often a long process. Andrea's husband, the political philosopher Russell Hardin, died two years ago after a long illness. We talked through the weeks and months leading up to each death, talked about the emotions and thoughts not usually acknowledged in public. The newest paintings convey a lot of those—the lightness that attends letting go, the playfulness and humor that comes when one is attentively waiting, waiting.

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Belag starts her paintings the day before by mixing a color chord of four to six colors. A musical term. I hadn't really looked at Kandinsky in a very long time, and came upon one of his harder-edged, later paintings at the Guggenheim on the way down from the Hilma Af Klint show. Both of them, the Swede and the Russian, mystics and music nuts, reminded me of what a tenuous business it has always been to look for the nowness and open-ended emotional intensity of music in paintings without, as Meyer Schapiro called it, *object matter*, the objects in the painting that usually get termed, confusingly, *the subject*.

Sunday Painter's forms float and slither. The salmon-colored salmon shapes glide past an Old Holland Violet-Grey paisley teardrop. Purplish Caput Mortuum (aka Dead Head) nuzzles alongside Indian Yellow and Ultramarine Blue. The wipes are the size of Belag's open hand. A bit of cold wax in the paint gives most of the colors a transparency that glows over the oil primer underneath. With their bunched-up shapes in the center, other

paintings in the series remind me that Belag studied under Guston at the Studio School. But *Sunday Painter's* shapes are dispersed, a composition in mid-dissolve.

I bring up De Keyser. She's a fan. His one-a-day method seemed to mean that each of his shapes can be quite simple, but their configuration on each canvas has some kind of profound rightness, a perfect tune. When I first saw Belag's work in person, in the mid-90s, she was painting grids, but now she says "the grid only goes so far." She talks about the challenge of turning your brain and seeing in, that there's space behind the shapes. I ask her what she means. First, you see something frontally → then askew → then, she says, "like that" which she demonstrates by reaching her arms out operatically wide and bending them inward like the hug of Saint Peter's colonnade.

The argument about provisional painting a decade or so ago got philosophically messy because the provisionality—the ambiguity inherent in whether something is finished—got mixed up with informality. Two quite different things that might seem superficially similar. The former, the possibility of a finish that is unfinished, exciting as it is, isn't engaged to the same extent with the ineffable thing we refer to when we say it has a "rightness," or simply "it works." That phrase, "it works," is both arbitrary and extremely powerful. For those of us who look at a lot of art, we know it when it hits us. I remember it in the first Mary Heilman I saw that blazed like stained glass, the colors wiggling between Stanley Whitney's blocks, or the Robert Ryman pieces at DIA in 2004 that changed my mood for the rest of that exceptionally hard year.

In economic terms, we now realize that fortunes go to those able to quantify, algorithmize, figure out "what works". In Belag's work, that rightness comes in the form of Beauty with a capital B, beauty in the capacious sense of possessing a profound sense of authenticity that comes from something that feels legitimate to the artist who made it first, and transmitting that profound sense of order and connection, mysteriously, to the viewer. This was Af Klint and Kandinsky's dream, of shaped colors dancing with each other in harmonies that resonate with the viewer. There's little else but this in *Sunday Painter*, but it doesn't feel distilled or empty. Painting, as a medium always wrestling with itself and the giant corpus of paintings in the world, is most thrilling when an artist reaches some kind of edge condition, further out on one particular peninsula than anyone has gone before. Belag's work becomes, for me, an edge condition for painting without flirting with minimalist near-nothingness; it tests out where Beauty can emerge, and what we can get to work. It opens up from a few wiped shapes into a sophisticated object able to transport one into a reverie about slippage, slipping away, the here and not hereness of life, death, and the varieties of love.