

In these large unstretched paintings on canvas by Sadko Hadzihasanovic we encounter images of a variety of characters, young and old – in fact some of them, those from appropriated *Toile de jouy* wallpaper, very old indeed. The contemporary crew, mostly hunters, are painted with an eye to realism, while the others do their pastoral thing (lambs, lutes etc.) within the linear stylistic confines of that period décor – although, at times, that design scheme reaches us in an *altered state* - in *Hunter's Feast*, the *Toile* scene is painted dayglow orange. The whole imagistic package is made with deliberate *unfinished*; simply, the paint doesn't cover everywhere. This brings a provisionality to the work; all is, perhaps, liable for replacement when (and if) a more permanent arrangement becomes available

Hunting – and hunters – seem to be tailor-made for the Marxist term *alienation*; alienated because that ideology has modernity seen as a complete disruption of people's relations to nature and natural sources of production - making hunters, and thus these *painted* hunters - marginalized figures, galactically distant from urban elites, stirred to action by the imposition of gun registries (and perhaps ready to vote – or fight - for the latest demagogue). In these paintings we find them either in paramilitary camo or immersed in the dark arts of corporate branding (stripes, dolls, beers and sneakers). Army surplus or ill-fitting jeans and dubiously flammable synthetic fabrics juxtaposed with the dirndl'ed décolletage of the maids and shepherds.

This cast, in their artfully painted ill-fitting denim and sniper-chic (*cast* because it is extraordinarily theatrical work - Hadzihasanovic's deconstructions are always more of a stage act than an intellectual pursuit) are painted, along with those shepherds and gambolling lambs - the whole repertoire of *the pastoral* as channelled through fragments of appropriated *toile*, that persistently popular French wallpaper that's been romanticizing quite another kind of country life from that of the hunter for about 250 years. It's a particularly odiously *recherché* version of *fêtes galantes* - scenes of decorous courtship and the tending of God's garden and creatures. The subsequent superimposition of the hunters provides Hadzihasanovic's opportunity to create *contrasts* (the critical operation for artist and viewer in these paintings is the negotiation of those contrasts). They are not subtle; rootless fringe-dwelling hunters in Arcadian surroundings. Hadzihasanovic eggs the pudding by painting his hunters in classical poses or by borrowing the composition of Rembrandt's *Night Watch* for one work. The elevation of these painted figures through that act of historical reference is both ironic and amusing.

The pastoral poem faded after the onset of the European Industrial Revolution in the 18th century, but its themes persist in poems that romanticize rural life or reappraise the natural world. Here's an early example, Christopher Marlowe from 1599:

*Come live with me and be my love,  
And we will all the pleasures prove,  
That Valleys, groves, hills, and fields,  
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.*

*And we will sit upon the Rocks,  
Seeing the Shepherds feed their flocks,  
By shallow Rivers to whose falls  
Melodious birds sing Madrigals*

And because Hadzihasanovic's rather unconvincing would-be cold-eyed hunter/killers appear to intrude on the imagery suggested by such poetry (and because those *melodious birds* won't be singing for long with the kind of ordinance on view here) let's note that intrusion with a contrasting quotation from The Bass Pro Shop's website:

*Secure your position at the top of the food chain with Hunting Supplies & Equipment... rely on quality optics and scopes to get the job done when it counts...*

It's worth noting here that Hadzihasanovic paints the handling of rifles and bows with extraordinary attention; an attention matched by his treatment of an Adidas logo or a single croc (in *Barbie*). These paintings invoke both texts included above in arrangements that make, as I have mentioned, the consideration of *contrast* the principal operation for the viewer. (Or, one might say that the paintings propose a collision of the two texts, Marlowe and *BPS*). An assertion of hierarchy (TOP of the food chain...) and a reference to the moment of the *kill* (...when it counts...) are both alluded to among the *valleys, groves and hills* in these paintings.

Like the studied *unfinished*, this collision of two worlds is a bit of a mess, a deliberate muddle; the two historical and cultural spaces in the work remain discrete, inviting comparison without any hope of integration or synthesis. But, like good farce, which relies on making absurd situations believable, the way that these paintings are made - the attention to details and particularly to the portraits of his cast - provides the required elevation, achieving a kind of credibility for them. The naturalistic detail (of a trigger or that croc, for example) interrupts the backdrop of lovers among ruins.

The *Toile de jouty* imagery, full of theatrical panache, does what it was always meant to do - bringing a tinge of sadness, wistfulness and sympathy to the proceedings - markers for the transience of love and earthly pleasures. But, complicating this we find that danger is everywhere - after all, 29 year old Kit Marlowe was dispatched in a *knife crime incident*, the equivalent of a hunter's gut shot perhaps, in a tavern - Mrs. Bull's House in Deptford, no less. Despite Hadzihasanovic's humour and theatricality, the contrasts in the painting promote unease; the line between a hunting club and a private army appears unstable - sporting skills readily transferable to insurgency. The *Toile de jouty* mythology as distant an accompaniment as the latest Netflix costume drama.

Hadzihasanovic's use of contrast reintroduces a central theme of much figurative painting - the relationship of innocence to experience, that's the welcome muddle here, the way that innocence shades into experience and vice versa - the paintings explore this ambiguity. We see it in *Lesson*, for example, where a white child learns hunting skills under the tutelage of a black youth. We see the paired notions again with the supposed innocence of the pastoral scenes and of the child warriors - neither convincing us that there aren't darker forces just, and only just, below the surface.

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