

Doron Langberg's paintings are lush, sensitive, filled with colour and emotion. Though begun from observation, the paint can't help but be expressive. A meditation on a beloved can flood a bathroom with magenta devotion (*Bather*, 2021), it can render their body prismatic in moonlight, replacing their kicked-off sheet with a luminous cover of daubs (*Sleeping 1*, 2020). Some paintings brazenly declare their obsession, with penises and with blooms; sometimes they quiet in the studious intensity of getting a shoulder or ochre just right (*Willy and Alan*, 2022). The paintings in this exhibition, *Part of Your World*, show Langberg making room for the varied intimacies of life – familial, solitary, and sensual – with the insistence that they should all be contained within the same sensibility: as in life, so in paint.

Langberg makes his paintings easy to love, for these reasons and more. Because of the surprises you might find on the surface, alternately smooth and textured. Because you already loved a flower, your partner, the sunset, and the painter's love gave you permission to experience your own more fully. Because you wanted to be seduced by colour or image or a gorgeous thigh, and his painting took you up and seduced you. Because they make you want more. The ease of this initial desire is intentional, and mirrors Langberg's own approach in choosing subjects with which he already has a meaningful relationship.

The commonality of desire and affection is an important starting point, which Langberg uses aesthetically and politically. As an entry point to painting, it creates sameness between viewers in approaching a desirable image, which, as a queer artist often painting

identifiably queer scenes, centres a perspective that has historically existed as an exception rather than a norm. Langberg talks about queerness like a verb – as an approach to life which infuses sexuality as readily as it does breakfast. Perhaps the banal is even more important in this light than the explicit, because what is easier to name is also easier to share.

Ease is coupled with Langberg's luxuriant approach towards paint and surface in a way that lowers a viewer's defences, readying us for subtler, more challenging desires. *Part of Your World* borrows its name from Ariel's famously exultant yearning in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. Surrounded by the fragments of a world which is not hers, she is desirous beyond her body, culture, and imagination. There are many versions of the story, but in all of them Ariel willingly submits to bodily transformation for love, and takes on the risk that in becoming visible to her beloved, she will become unknowable in her original environment. That for the mermaid this constitutes heteronormative assimilation is a valid critique. But there are other, more vulnerable interpretations: this is a story about how loving (but not necessarily being loved) changes us, irrevocably. It is a story about a longing and curiosity that exceeds knowledge of the self, and accepts that an orientation towards another may exact the security of this knowledge as payment.

This irresponsible and intense bargain is only ostensibly reasonable, and only because her voice is so sweet. Langberg places a similar bet on paint, and levels all of its beauties to his advantage. On a narrative level, there is a similarity. Langberg shows us

glimpses of his subjects, particular moments that suggest complete other worlds that would be inaccessible if not for the painting. But the magic of painting is conjuring wholes from mere parts, creating depth from flatness, implying but never achieving interiority. What you get when you desire a painting is not the thing that is depicted. You get only the painting, never the bud, the lover, the experience. Langberg offers us an image of the beloved, the nameable, and in exchange, he asks that we stay with these questions about how we recognise what and who we want, what it means for things to look the way they do, and how this desire for paint threatens the knowability of its subjects.

The distinction between the qualitative and the nameable organises the structure of meaning in Langberg's paintings. Where the latter is defined by colour, application, and gesture, the former is primarily determined by line, assisted by rendering. What might be referred to as 'abstract' in Langberg's work bears little ideological resemblance to abstraction as a group of historical styles/languages dealing with non-objectivity, political utopianism, universalism, or even the primacy of gesture. For Langberg, abstraction is actually in service of figuration, it intends to represent things that feel abstract in life by association: mood, weather, sensuality, psychic environments. The people and things in the work are literally filtered through these frames.

This is another layer of the relatable in Langberg's work. What could be truer and more obvious than to say that interiority is abstract? And yet, figuration, drawing, 'observation from life' or a photograph demand that

we acknowledge that things exist outside of our interpretations of them. No amount of grief will literally change the face of the brother, or the structure of the field; ecstasy might change the feel of a body but not its edge; especially if, as a painter, you want these things to be recognised as such. While line cools these compositions down – for Langberg, line is usually referential and notational, creating distinctions between things, making rendering feel correct – this coolness suggests a truth alongside emotion: that at the heart of intimacy is a difference that cannot be assimilated, a separateness demarcated by edges and defined by the particular visual characteristics of an other. Langberg presents painting as a temporary reconciliation between line and gesture, which is to say, between what is, and what can be carried away from itself. The ethic here is to accept subjectivity as fundamentally limited, partial, able to access the outside only in fragments, even as powerful emotions try to trick us into believing that fullness is the same as wholeness.

A vivid red in *Tamar*, 2021, is both hair and body heat as the girl lends colour to her paints. *Pete and Horatio*, 2023, seem to be made of light and not flesh, but I understand that they end along the edges of their arms, and in the distinctness of their countenance. The penetration in *Lovers 2*, 2022, requires me to identify an ass and genitals, but the real actors are the dense, rusty sienna cleaving the top from the bottom of the painting, and a blue ribbon of a mark, a thong, which ties the image together like a cold lace. Despite the conventional temptation to conflate expressiveness and touch with 'the

subjective', Langberg's insistence on drawing as depth constitutes a framework to understand the freer, painterly gestures as an actual space.

An idea of space is an indication that awareness is at play on the level of representation. It is how Langberg can make a painting from the point of view of its subject: the bather remaking the bathroom in his own fuchsia requires seeing bath and pink as both deviation and amplification. It is also how subjectivity emerges in the paintings as subject matter alongside the figures themselves, which poses the question: what are the conditions of sensing and being, within the terms of Langberg's paintings? Unlike in a vernacular encounter, when desire might be followed by action, in painting, emotions are kept for later, deferred on purpose. The body which longs to touch gazes instead, touches a different surface, rearranges sensation into space for an idea, not for the lover before them. And, likewise, figures in Langberg's paintings exist not to act but to be acted upon, they pretend to be waiting for another person (family, friend, lover), but they are actually waiting for paint, to be rendered by this imperfect substitute for longing. They are made visible as the intentional products of these delays, not despite them.

When asked by Dean Kissick if he thought about sex all the time as he was working on a recent group of more explicit works, Langberg replied that, no, he thought about painting all the time. It's a reminder that 'part of your world' is also a desire to be a part of a long conversation in Western painting; that a deep wish in Langberg's work is for his personal experience to become recognisable

according to the terms of other artists. Ariel, a notorious hoarder, kept a Georges de la Tour painting with her whatsits and ill-used cutlery. Langberg collects art historical references in this manner, alongside pieces of his life, precious artefacts to be adored, studied, wilfully and accidentally misused. Next to underwear elastic, beaches, nieces, you can find fluffy humidity (Renoir), fearlessness in the face of banality (Degas), air like mottled shadows (Bonnard), resplendent mud (Monet), the sublimated ecstasy of contour (Bronzino). Langberg uses them to comb the hair of his sitters. He wears them out.

There are valid questions to ask about this history. Not all of it was good. Aesthetics have a notoriously uneven track record at changing the world, and are poor at redeeming the imperfections of its practitioners. Even as Ariel professes that she cannot understand how a human world that makes such wonderful things could be bad, contemporary culture is well versed in just how bad that world has been. It is not an accident that so many of Langberg's influences are the impressionists and their children, painters responding to industrialisation by inflecting naturalism from the inside out. They shifted the role of painting from one of reproducing 'dominant' narratives of state and religion to one of representing the conditions of the visible in an increasingly unrecognisable world.

Enlisting these painters to his own surfaces is a way of asserting the immediacy of that need, now. Our world is only becoming more abstract, harsher, harder to recognise, which clarifies how much more

attenuation we need to how we appear before one another. To not be alone as we face our present; the hope that the accumulated knowledge of the past can help us. This is the uneasy bargain that traditionalism makes with change: keep the bathwater and read it like tea leaves. The sediment washed from bodies over centuries makes the paint we use now, as we try to make the present as fragile and eternal as intimacy makes us believe it is.

Langberg's paintings aren't funny, but his show titles often invite a distinctly queer and permissive attitude towards camp, which is to say, the thin line between the exquisite and the embarrassing. To understand the rawness implicit within what could be sentimental is an astute assessment of how needs and desires feel: uncomfortable, excessive, undeniable. Langberg's paintings always return a viewer to desire, to the unfulfilled wishes worth keeping close. Langberg gives us paintings that help us maintain the belief that we are changeable, that we remain vulnerable, susceptible to affect. The more beautiful the flourish, the more beautiful we might become as we want it.

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## Doron Langberg *Part of Your World*

1 February – 26 May 2024 Kunsthal Rotterdam



**Tamar**, 2021 Oil on linen, 45.7 × 61 cm | 18 × 24 in



**Pete and Horatio**, 2023 Oil on linen, 127 × 152.4 cm | 50 × 60 in