

Ted Pim

Full Moon

Jan 19 — Feb 25, 2023 | Brussels

Ted Pim once watched a nature documentary where a tree fell in a forest. In the film, he saw the repercussions, how the fauna and flora on the forest floor struggled, climbing over each other in an attempt to get to the light. ‘That is how I see my flower paintings’, he explains: that underneath – or as part of – the beauty of the paintings, is this dark overtone. Of course, Pim’s paintings are inspired by the old masters. In his studio, printed images of Dutch seventeenth century and Italian Renaissance paintings, among others, are tacked to the walls next to the canvases he is working on. Each painting can have a number of sources, so a floral work could be inspired by a Dutch Golden Age canvas and a dress from a contemporary fashion shoot can end up as the garb of one of Pim’s figures, looking contemporary and Renaissance at once. This mix of high art and mass produced imagery is in keeping with Pim’s work, where references, direct quotations, source imagery, stories and personal associations meet. He builds singular paintings from multiple art historical sources, and the result is a personal vision, where, Pim says, he constructs his own reality.

These diverse reference points are at times easier to recognise than others. The starting point for this show was the triptych, in which the Madonna and Child Pim paints are a direct quotation from Raphael’s c.1506 painting of Mary, Christ and the infant John the Baptist, known as the Madonna of the Goldfinch (because John the Baptist holds and shows the little bird to Jesus, who touches it gently). Pim was raised Catholic, in Belfast. Though he is no longer religious, the images he saw in church in his childhood have fed into and inspired his artwork: ‘I’m still fascinated by the extravagance of it all, the gold, the Baroque paintings, the feeling of awe when you enter a grand chapel’. Raphael’s numerous representations of the Madonna are some of the most iconic imagery created in the religion.

But the triptych also shows another kind of world-making – it is the result of working with artificial intelligence. When Pim was invited by an artificial intelligence company to imagine how his art practice could be informed by working with AI, he gave the software descriptions, a list of words that describe some of the things in his paintings, and the result was new source imagery he could incorporate. His last series of paintings had a palette inspired by Disney movies, and the AI read the Raphael Madonna, Child and St John the Baptist as Disney characters. It also created the arched forest background in which Pim’s Madonna is nestled. It immediately reminded Pim of Mass rocks, the gathering places in nature where Irish Catholics, who were banned from practising their faith following the English conquest of Ireland, would meet to say Mass, using rocks for altars.

Pim’s Madonna has three arms. On the third hand is a ‘lovers’ eye’ – a late eighteenth-century fad for miniatures with an image of one’s lover’s eye, which began with King George IV, who sent a miniature of his eye to the woman he was courting, Maria Anne Fitzherbert, whom he could not marry because she was a twice-widowed Catholic.

King George IV also wore a brooch with Fitzherbert’s eye on it, a small sign of devotion that became widespread across high society in England for half a century, then disappeared. Other eyes appear throughout Pim’s recent paintings: unfamiliar in a contemporary context, when their story is told they present a new haunting intimacy to the exhibition. A companion piece to the triptych shows a double-headed swan in a forest reminiscent in shade and colour of the arch of trees the Madonna inhabits in the triptych. The swan appears often in Pim’s work, a reference to numerous myths. In Celtic mythology, a familiar tale that Pim would have heard as a child, tells of the four beautiful children of King Lir, who were so beloved by their father that their jealous stepmother cast a spell on them, turning them into four white swans. Swans also appear in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* – twice. Zeus comes as a swan to Leda, the Queen of Sparta and wife of Tyndareus, and has her. And King Cynus of Aetolia punished the young man who was devoted to him, Phylis, by throwing him off a cliff, only to watch as Phylis transforms into a swan and flies away.

Ovid’s poem recounts numerous instances of metamorphosis and shapeshifting and they are the reason and the result of

violence. A new shape can save – like Phylus, or like Daphne, who turns into a tree when she escapes Apollo who chases her against her wishes. A new shape can also be a form of violence (Zeus becomes a swan, a bull when he abducts Europa, a bird with his wife Hera) or a punishment when humans were cast into stones, objects, animals and fauna in retribution for angering the gods. Something is not what it seems and stories are multiple. The shapeshifting of the children of Lir becomes a foundation for Swan Lake and multiple representations of Leda exist throughout the history of art. We tell these stories over and over again, and they become more beautiful and haunting with the telling.

Like a two-headed swan, like a single eye sent to a loved one, like a third arm and like the world we live in: affecting, memorable, chaotic. And then we see something in it all, and we try to reflect it, explain it, through narrative and image and art. Leda was famous for her good looks and her daughter by Zeus was Helen of Troy, who said to have been the most beautiful woman in the world. Again: beauty emerges from violence. Look in the back of the compositions of Pim's floral paintings and see – the struggle is there. What is in the back attempts to come to the forefront, what is ahead suppresses

what's behind. It doesn't make it any less beautiful, or any less violent. And that makes it very, very real.

– Orit Gat, writer and art critic.