

Are Men Unicorns?

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Almine Rech Gallery is pleased to present *Are Men Unicorns?*, a new exhibition by Ida Tursic & Wilfried Mille, their fourth with the gallery and their second in Brussels.

Tursic & Mille began collaborating in 2000, the start of a new Millennium marked by a near-constant deluge of photographic images and technological, social, and political upheavals that seem to occur at a perpetually accelerating pace. From the very beginning, they have deliberately sought to simultaneously embrace and critically understand what place their primary medium of painting can occupy in such circumstances, wielding it like a weapon to place an ancient and versatile pictorial technology at the forefront of a dynamic practice.

Many have written about Tursic & Mille's use of images found on the internet as fodder for their voracious imagination and as a base to build their pictures upon, their seemingly haphazard selection ranging from porn stars to random celebrity pictures, as if the formal qualities of their work had to yield to the very contemporary and mistaken tyranny of content or subject matter as the primary point of art making. Much less has been written about the wide range of painterly techniques they use to pursue their idiosyncratic and ambitious path, to accomplish their project of making artworks that simultaneously remain current and relevant to contemporary culture yet are consciously inscribed within the grand historical narrative of Western painting.

Not content to recycle appropriated images—as if Appropriation, that old bag, should still be “a thing” for artists working in 2018—Tursic & Mille have assigned themselves the task of creating artworks that both have staying power and are also “new and interesting,” to paraphrase a long-ago recurring feature in now-defunct French magazine *Actuel*. They do so in a militant manner, by using in a whimsical, humorous way a medium too often touted as dead, a defiant and radical choice if there is one in today's *Zeitgeist*. Moreover, though ambitious, their paintings are never arrogant or condescending. They remain approachable and enjoyable for all. With light touches, Tursic & Mille deflect the apparent magnitude of their aspiration, deftly mixing actual painterly touch-ups with the inclusion of offbeat figures such as the recurring presence of their Border Collie Maximus, who often appears as a small detail within a large-scale painting. Other recurrent images include Bettie Page's silhouette, flowers, and actual landscapes like Cézanne's original inspiration, Mont Sainte-Victoire.

Tursic & Mille's paintings can be at once figurative in subject but abstract in treatment, merging for example quasi-photographic techniques in the background of bucolic landscapes and freeform blobs and splotches as top layers, making use of contrasting effects between a monochromatic grey scenery and colorful brushstrokes applied as covering or obliterating tropes on top of base layers. The relation between obfuscation and unveiling resounds throughout the exhibition, where in addition to the images described above a character is covered in translucent washes that fail to hide his naked body, while elsewhere broad and thick swathes of brightly-colored paint swatches make illusory attempts to blot out nude figures.

Likewise, the relationship between the covered and uncovered aspects of the painting is found again in Tursic & Mille's experimentation with the ambiguous shift between 2D and 3D images, making use of oil paint and sculpture and an old school jigsaw to create what they call "shaped paintings." These are flat, realistically painted wooden decoupages of animals (mythological or realistic, *e.g.*, cats, dogs, and unicorns) or objects like a small fire, installed on pedestals made out of wooden logs. They are designed to be seen frontally, like a painting, the back of the silhouette left blank and unfinished yet visible to a viewer wanting to turn around. Here, Maximus the dog appears as a shape painting, a small bouncing figure in front of a fire, together with another recurrent animal in Tursic & Mille's pantheon, a fluffy poodle, and a newcomer, Manet's cat Zizi of *Olympia's* fame, an enduring symbol of domestic life woven into a landmark of Modernist art history. Reprising Zizi within the context of *Are Men Unicorns?* sends a clear signal that beyond the fantastic bestiary, the icons of Pop culture, the palette-like splotches, the flowers and landscapes, the humor and the whimsy, Tursic & Mille's painting displays with unabashed optimism and ambition a desire to become landmarks of their own for the 21st century.

- Noëllie Roussel